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A COLLISION WAS INEVITABLE.—*Page* 8.

THE MOTOR CYCLE CHUMS IN THE GOLD FIELDS

BY

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The Motor Cycle Chums in the Gold Fields

CHAPTER I.

THE "HEATHEN CHINEE."

"Whoa, there!"

"Hold on, Wing Lung!"

"Where are you off to—China?"

These exclamations volleyed from the astonished lips of Ned Winton and Tom Chase, the two Motor Cycle Chums, as something that looked like a streak of blue flame flashed past them down the steep mountain road along which they were riding on their two well-known mounts, the Red Streak and the Blue Bird.

From behind them had suddenly come a series of shouts and alarmed yells, and they had

turned their heads just in time to behold Wing Lung, the clever Chinee, dash around a corner at the speed of a runaway locomotive. His "pop-pop bikee," as he called the one-cylindered motor cycle which had been given to him when Ned came into possession of the Red Streak, was roaring like a gatling gun going into action. Blue smoke streaked out behind it in almost as straight a line as Wing's pigtail, which stood out as stiffly as a strand of barbed wire.

The road at this point appeared fairly to hang on the edge of the mountain, like an eyebrow on a human face. On one side the rugged acclivity shot steeply upward. On the other a deep canyon dropped as sharply downward.

The boys had had just time to turn out and avoid a collision as Wing Lung shot by, clinging to his handle bars with an expression of wild terror on his round and usually good-humored countenance.

"Him lun away! All samee locusmocus!" he had yelled as he passed.

"Put on the brakes!" roared Ned after him.

"No can put on blakee. Blakee they blakee all samee," came faintly back, as Wing Lung dashed on down the road, his machine leaping into the air like a bucking broncho every time he struck a rut.

"Gracious, Ned, he'll be killed!" gasped out Tom, as the two boys put on speed and made after the runaway motor cycle and its badly scared Mongolian burden.

"No, this hill ends a short distance ahead. If he can only stick on, and doesn't meet something, he'll—G-g-r-eat S-s-scott!"

There was no need for Tom to inquire the reason for Ned's exclamation. They had just rounded a curve which brought them into full view of the diminishing figure of Wing Lung as it catapulted down the hill. The steep grade ran downward like a white ribbon between the

canyon and the hillside. At its foot there had just come into sight a loaded hay wagon, slowly ascending the height.

Toward this, Wing Lung on his runaway motor cycle was racing at uncontrollable speed. There was no room, even had there been time, for the driver of the hay wagon to turn out. A collision was inevitable. The boys, with alarmed looks, checked the speed of their machines and helplessly watched for the accident to happen.

Even at their distance they could hear one loud yell from the Chinaman:

"Me one piecee smashee up!"

Half unconsciously both boys turned away for an instant. They could almost imagine that they heard the crash of the collision as the unfortunate Mongolian plunged into the hay wagon. But no such sound occurred. Instead came shouts from the driver of the wagon.

They looked down toward the foot of the hill. The load of hay lay in a huge pile in the road,

while the driver was trying to quiet two plunging, terrified horses. Of Wing Lung nothing was to be seen, but something that looked like his motor cycle was to be made out lying at one side of the spilled load of hay.

"Come on, Ned; let's find out the worst," urged Tom, once more giving his motor cycle power.

"Maybe it isn't as bad as we think. Remember how I ran into a hay wagon once in the Northwest?"

The two machines raced off down the hill, their young owners greatly perturbed at the thought of Wing Lung's probable fate. In a few minutes they were flinging themselves from their machines beside the big pile of hay. At the same instant a faint yell became perceptible.

"Me killee heap dead! Me allee samee go Chinee heaben!"

"That's Wing, all right!" exclaimed Tom, "and thank goodness he's alive. But where on earth is he?"

Where, indeed, could the Chinee have vanished? Not a sign was to be seen of him, but still, there was his voice calling out, faintly enough, to be sure, but still audible. It was as if he were appealing to them from a great distance.

For an instant they puzzled over the problem and then Tom solved it by a flash of inspiration:

"Look! He's in the hay!" he cried.

Sure enough, sticking out of the spilled load could now be made out a pair of blue-clad legs waving to and fro as if in protest. But of the rest of their owner nothing was visible save his white socks and red-and-green-embroidered shoes with their thick, soft soles.

"Grab hold and we'll pull him out before he suffocates!" cried Tom.

With a will each lad seized a leg and tugged. In a few seconds they dragged Wing Lung out of the hay in much the same manner that a cork is pulled out of a bottle. His eyes, nose, ears,

and pigtail were full of cockle burrs and hay seed, but as soon as he could speak he informed them that he wasn't hurt.

"Me welly much allee litee now," he assured them; "welly good thing for cleveh Chinee that hay be there, so be!"

"A good thing, eh, you yellow-skinned rascal!" bawled the indignant owner of the hay load, who, up to that instant, had been too busy quieting his horses to take any part in the proceedings. "I'll fix you for dumping my load and scaring my team half to death, you pigtailed heathen! Come down the road like a blue streak, would yer, you Mongolian scorcher, you! Take that!"

The indignant driver, a husky young farmer, red with what he deemed righteous wrath, aimed a terrific blow at Wing Lung. But it didn't land. Instead Wing Lung, with a rapid movement, dodged it, and the next instant the young

farmer was rendered harmless by a paroxysm of sneezing.

"A-choo! A-ch-o-o-o-o-o! Ach-hoh-h-hoh-hoh-o-o-o-o-o-h!" he exploded, while the boys doubled up with laughter.

Wing Lung, without a smile on his face, went on picking hay seeds out of his long, black, silky queue.

"Me thinkee that feller heap sabee Chinee sneezing powder now, all samee!" he remarked, as if talking to himself. "Heap too fleash. Wing Lung fixee him; no fightee for whilee."

When the young and irate farmer had charged at him like an enraged bull, Wing Lung, by an almost imperceptible movement, had produced a pinch of white powder from a mysterious recess of his loose blouse. With a flirt of the fan which this odd Chinee always carried, he had filled the air in front of him with the pungent stuff.

"A-c-h-hoh-hoh-hoh-o!" the tormented agri-

culturist kept exploding, while he writhed about and wiped his watering eyes.

The boys began to look alarmed. But Wing Lung merely went on brushing himself with the precision that marked all his movements. For all the notice he took of his victim he might as well have been as far removed from the scene as his native China.

"Say, Wing Lung!" broke out Tom indignantly, "this is going too far! He'll sneeze his head off."

But Wing Lung only replied:

"Him allee litee bimeby, so be. Heap sneezee, heap goodee. Fixee him tempee so he no more mad than little sheepee."

CHAPTER II.

THE LONE COTTONWOOD.

As a matter of fact, when his paroxysm of sneezing finally subsided, the young farmer did appear to be considerably mollified, not to say a trifle awed. He made no further effort to molest Wing Lung, who, for his part, generously declared that had it not been for the fact that he had scared the farmer's horses by his mad flight, and that their sudden shying had dumped the load of hay, he might have been seriously hurt.

"And thar's more truth than poetry in that," declared the other, in an aggrieved tone. "My horses scared out of ten years' growth, an' me with an hour's work on my hands to get that hay back again! I guess it ought to be worth some-

thing to you fellows, if this Chink is anything to you."

The boys had to admit that there was some truth in what the man said, and a bargain was at last agreed upon that was satisfactory to all concerned. They helped the man reload his hay and then, the injury to Wing Lung's machine yielding quickly to Ned's mechanical skill, they remounted and set off once more for their destination, the Winton Ranch, near San Benito, Redwood county, California, where both boys lived.

They covered the level road at the foot of the grade at a good speed. The way lay across a barren stretch of country, dry and uninteresting. Here and there grew a cottonwood or a live oak, but for the most part the valley between the range they had passed and the one that lay between themselves and home was bare of anything but dust and sage brush.

As they ride along, with Wing Lung slightly

in the rear, it may be a good opportunity to tell those of our readers who have not yet made their acquaintance something further about Ned and Tom and their Chinee.

In the first volume of this series, "The Motor Cycle Chums Around the World," the two young lads and their faithful attendant and factotum circled the globe, depending frequently upon their machines and meeting many interesting adventures on the way. In Germany they had an exciting time on a runaway dirigible, while across the barren slopes of Siberia they met with many unusual experiences. Space will not permit us to do more than hint at all they encountered in the line of eventful doings, both grave and gay.

The second volume told of the boys' adventures with the Northwest Mounted Police. Under the title of "The Motor Cycle Chums of the North West Patrol," as vivid a picture as possible was given of the lives of that body of semi-military enforcers of law and order. In

breaking up a gang of cattle rustlers the boys played a lively part, as, indeed, did also Wing Lung, the "welly cleveh Chinee," as he called himself.

Returning to California, Ned found that his parents had determined to prolong their stay in the East, so he and Tom Chase, the latter the son of a widow who owned a neighboring ranch and who was also absent on a visit, were "baching it" on the Winton ranch. They found their days busy enough, what with superintending the ranch work and making frequent trips on their motor cycles into the surrounding country. It was from one of these that they were returning home when Wing Lung met with his adventure.

Gliding swiftly along, it seemed that home would be reached in a short time and without further incident. But such was not to be the case. A loud "pop!" from Ned's front tire announced that a tube had burst.

"Bother the thing!" indignantly exclaimed the boy, coming to a stop, while his companions did likewise, "new last week and gone already!"

"Maybe you can patch it," suggested Tom; "I've got the vulcanizer."

"I certainly will if I can. I'm not a millionaire, and while I've got a new tube in my kit, I don't want to use it unless I have to."

"Don't blame you," remarked Tom, delving into his kit after the vulcanizing apparatus.

Wing Lung broke the silence that ensued, while Ned stripped off the tire, by a sudden exclamation.

"Heap plentee buzzard off there, so be," he remarked casually.

Above a cottonwood tree that grew on the banks of a small arroyo, or dried up water course, scores of the black, broad-winged scavengers were leisurely circling. Slowly, in long, lazy circles, they swung. Some of them swept by quite close above the boys' heads as they sat at

the roadside. Others were as yet mote-like specks against the blue sky, but constantly swinging lower.

"Must be a dead cow over there," commented Tom.

"Funny they don't light, though," rejoined Ned; "usually buzzards will come down in a hurry to anything dead; but those fellows don't appear to be in any rush."

"No, that's so. They're just swinging round that cottonwood as if they were watching something."

"Wonder what it can be. Maybe a stray from Foster's ranch. He lives over west there."

"If it wasn't so hot I'd go and see," declared Tom; and then the next minute he added, "guess I'll go, anyway. There's something queer about the way those buzzards are acting."

"Whatever it is they are after, it's right by that cottonwood. Better head for there," advised Ned.

"All right. Come on, Wing."

"Welly well. Me come. You like take medicine?"

"What do you mean?"

The Chinee shrugged his shoulders.

"Me thinkee maybe you need him plitty soon, so be."

"What for?"

"For what be under cottonwood, so be."

Tom stared at him. The Chinaman's moon-like, good-humored face was unruffled. Apparently he was quite in earnest.

"How in the world do you know what's under that tree?" Tom burst out at length.

"Me sabe many t'ings," was the reply; "you takee medicine—yes?"

Once or twice before the "cleveh Chinee" had shown a strange sense of intuition, and now, for some reason he could not fathom, Tom nodded his head. Going to Ned's machine, he removed from the bag in which it was carried a "first aid"

kit. It contained bandages, antiseptics and so on, and on more than one occasion had been useful to the Motor Cycle Chums.

Wing Lung nodded approval as he looked on.

"Plentee good. Now we go," he said. "Men plitty wise. Sometimes buzzard more wise."

And so Tom and the Chinaman set off across the strip of barren, sandy ground between the spot where they had stopped and the lone cottonwood, above which an ever-increasing number of buzzards were swinging and wheeling, their black, ragged-tipped wings perfectly motionless as they circled.

Ned went on with his vulcanizing, for the "blow-out" in the tube had shown itself to be capable of repair. He was so engrossed in his work that he did not look once more toward the cottonwood till he heard a shout from that direction. Raising his eyes, he saw Tom coming stumblingly toward him over the rough ground.

His hat was off and he was plainly excited.

"Ned! Ned! Come here quick!" he was shouting, as he ran.

CHAPTER III.

THE WOUNDED WAYFARER.

Ned was on his feet in a jiffy. He knew Tom too well to suppose for an instant that his chum's summons meant anything trivial. In it he recognized a sound that meant that something distinctly out of the ordinary had occurred off there by the cottonwood.

"What's the trouble, Tom?" he shouted, as Tom came puffingly within easy earshot.

"It's over there by the cottonwood! A man! He's——"

"Dead?" exclaimed Ned. as he recalled the great flocks of buzzards wheeling above the lone tree.

"No—that is, I don't think so. But he's badly hurt."

By the time Tom had gone thus far Ned was at his side.

"Let's hurry back," he exclaimed; "perhaps we can do something to help him. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Why, there's a big bruise on his head. He's unconscious and breathing heavily. A good thing those buzzards were hovering above him. He might have lain there for days if our attention hadn't been attracted."

It didn't take long to reach the ragged bank of the arroyo. It sloped steeply down to the dry bed of what was, in the early spring when the Sierra snows melted, a roaring torrent. Now it was just an arid creek bed; but still, under a big rock, a small pool filled with green-scummed water remained.

Near this lay the figure of a man clad in rough blue garments and coarse hide boots. His sombrero lay at some little distance from his still form, above which Wing Lung was crouched,

bathing a cut in the back of the man's head with a handkerchief wetted in the pool by the rock.

"How's he getting along, Wing?" inquired Tom, as the two chums half-clambered, half-slid down the sandy bank of the dry water course.

The Chinaman looked up with a grave look on his ordinarily mask-like countenance.

"Him plenty bad, Massel Tom. So be he get heap big crack on back of head."

"Here, let me have a look, Wing," said Ned, coming to the Chinaman's side. "Humph! that is a nasty crack. It needs a doctor to fix that up."

The man lay partly on his face on the ground, one shoulder plowed into the sandy creek bed as if his fall had been violent. Across the back of his skull was an angry-looking wound. Plainly, it had been inflicted by some blunt weapon—a club, possibly. At any rate, as they heard the injured man's labored breathing, it struck both

Ned and Tom that here was a case for more skill than they possessed.

"Wing, you go and get your machine. Ride as fast as you can to Dr. Duncan's ranch. Luckily he doesn't live far from here. Waste no time in getting back with the doctor."

Silently, and with the same agility that marked all his movements, the Chinaman rose to his feet and climbed the steep bank, sure-footed as a cat.

"Me back plentee soón, so be," he exclaimed, as he topped the bank and vanished.

"Now, then," said Ned, as the Chinaman disappeared, "we must do what we can for this poor fellow till Wing gets back."

"Wouldn't he rest more easily if we turned him over a little?" suggested Tom.

"I think so. Take off your coat and we'll make a pillow out of it for him. That's it. Now, then, catch hold."

Not without the exertion of considerable effort, for the injured man was heavily built, they

managed to move him into a more comfortable position. He was a large man, rugged and weather beaten, although now a deadly pallor underlay his tan. He was of about middle age. A big, chestnut-colored beard hid the lower part of his face, but judging from the features that could be seen that, too, must have been as rugged and as firmly molded as the rest of his countenance.

"Looks like a man who has lived most of his life in the open," commented Ned.

"Yes; I've rarely seen a more powerful-looking chap, even in the Northwest. What should you think he is, Ned?"

"I don't know. Sailor, maybe; something like that. He's—— Hello, Tom, look there!"

Ned pointed excitedly to the sand in the vicinity of the unconscious man. Along it lay a thin, glittering line of a bright yellow hue. Ned stooped and scooped some of it up in his fingers.

"What is it?" demanded Tom, peering into

Ned's outstretched palm, which the latter was regarding with round, wide-open eyes.

"Gold!" declared Ned, in awe-struck tones. "Gold dust! And look there, Tom, what's that yonder?"

Tom picked up the object indicated. It looked like a tiny yellow pebble.

"A nugget!" he exclaimed; "I've seen specimens like it in town."

"Tom, we've stumbled across a mystery of some sort."

"That's clear; but I'm bothered if I can even hazard any solution."

"Nor can I. What is this man doing here, wounded, in this unfrequented place, with this gold spilled near him? How did he get here, and with what object?"

"With no object at all," declared Tom.

"What are you talking about?"

"He was brought here. The men who injured

him deliberately threw him into this arroyo, hoping to conceal traces of their act."

"They must have robbed him, too."

"Plainly enough. In their hurry they spilled some of his gold."

"But there are no gold mines near here, so that the mystery of what he was doing in this part of the country remains unsolved."

"Yes; there's only one man who can tell that."

"And who is that?"

"The man himself."

"But, Tom, see here; there's a bit of paper lying on the ground. It must have been jerked out of his pocket when the thieves went through them."

"Well, let's have a look at it."

Tom picked up the scrap of paper. It had something scrawled on it. He narrowed his eyes to decipher it and then gave a shout of surprise.

"Great cookies and horned toads, Ned, this

beats all!" was the exclamation that fell from his lips. The boy looked fairly dumfounded.

"Why, what's up now?"

"This bit of paper!" exclaimed Tom gaspingly, holding out the scrap of writing, still with the same astounded look on his face.

"Well, what about it?"

"It's—it's got my name written on it!" choked out Tom, and then it was Ned's turn to give a cry of amazement.

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERY OF THE ROAD.

But the mystery had to remain one for some time thereafter. The boys were still searching the ground for some further light on the puzzle which confronted them, when there came a sudden sound of wheels. A few minutes later the kindly face of Dr. Duncan appeared on the edge of the ravine and peered over in frank astonishment.

Dr. Duncan was a fresh-complexioned, gray-haired man of past middle age. As a matter of fact, he had long since retired from active practice as a physician to give himself up to his geological studies. These had taken him to most civilized parts of the world, and a few uncivilized ones. But he still continued to give the

benefit of his medical skill to his scattered neighbors in the Lompos Valley.

"We-el!" he exclaimed, as he gazed down on the boys. "What on earth have you young chaps stumbled on now? Wing told me a long tale about an unconscious man in this gully. Appears to have been struck down. How is he?"

"Still breathing, doctor, but he looks pretty bad," responded Ned. "I think that the sooner you look after him the better."

"Quite right; you did well to send for me. I'll be with you in a minute. Wing, hand me my bag there—that's right. Now, then."

With almost the agility of a boy, Dr. Duncan slid down the bank, and in a jiffy was beside them. Bending over the unconscious man, he felt his pulse and then examined the wound.

"Humph! A magnificent physical specimen or he would hardly have survived that blow. Here, Ned, hold his head up while I give him some restoratives."

The doctor fumbled in his bag and when he had produced and administered the required stimulants, he bade Ned lay the man's head down again.

"He ought to come to before long, and then, maybe, he can tell us something about himself," said the doctor. "In the meantime suppose you tell me your part of the story."

Ned rapidly related the part that they had played in the discovery of the senseless man, and then, bursting with excitement, went on to relate the finding of the gold dust and the slip of paper with Tom Chase's name on it.

"Humph! Sounds quite romantic. Let's have a look at that gold dust," said the prosaic doctor, when Ned had finished his recital.

Ned made for the flat-topped rock where he and Tom had carefully deposited the scooped-up gold dust and the nugget. He put a pinch of the former in his palm and thrust the latter in his pocket. The doctor was presently examining

both with care. The boys, as they watched him, saw his eyebrows raise and his lips pucker up in a whistle of astonishment.

"This is indeed a mystery, as you phrased it, Ned," he said at length.

"Yes, our finding the gold——" began Ned; but the doctor checked him with a sharp exclamation.

"Gold! This is no more gold than the sand in the bottom of this creek."

"W-h-a-t?" The questioning word came in chorus.

Wing Lung, seeing something unusual going on, slipped down from the top of the bank so that he might miss nothing of it.

"Well, if it isn't gold, what is it?" stoutly demanded Ned, feeling, somehow, that he had been cheated.

"Sorry to spoil your romance, my boy, but it's brass. Just brass filings and a small hunk of molten brass, and that's all."

"But, what——" from Ned.

"Why on earth——" broke in Tom.

"Hold on a minute," cried the doctor, raising his hand; "one at a time. I don't know what, or why, any more than you do. It's all just as inscrutable to me as to you. Let's have a look at that bit of paper a minute, Tom."

Tom handed him the torn scrap which bore his name inscribed upon it. The doctor knitted his brows over it for a time. Then he spoke.

"This doesn't tell us anything. Except that it's very badly written, evidently by a comparatively uneducated man, it shows nothing except that this man, or some one of his friends, knows you. You're quite sure you never saw him before?"

"Quite," declared Tom positively; "I'm absolutely certain of that."

The man lying on the dry creek bed stirred uneasily and groaned.

"Hush!" adjured the doctor, "the stimulants are working. Not a word now."

He bent over the man, his fingers on the feeble pulse.

Presently the man opened his eyes and stared wildly about. All at once his gaze lit on Wing Lung. He shrank back as if in terror of the Chinaman.

"It's Sing Lee!" he cried, with pitiful fear. "Don't; don't strike me again, Sing Lee!"

As if the effort, or the shock, had been too much for him, the man sank back once more into unconsciousness.

"Well," announced the doctor, "I can tell you two young gentlemen two things; this man will recover, and he is in mortal fear of a Chinaman. Beyond that the affair is——"

"A Chinese puzzle," broke in Tom.

"Yes; and the solution will not come till he gets better. I think I shall keep him at my house

till he is well again. In the meantime if anything of interest turns up I'll let you know at once."

With some difficulty they managed to get the heavy form of the stricken man up the steep bank and into the doctor's buggy. Then, with brief farewells, they parted, the boys leaving the doctor and his patient at a point where the two roads they were to follow branched off in a Y, one leading over the steep slope of a range of foothills, beyond which lay the Winton and Chase ranches, the other continuing down the valley to the doctor's home.

As they topped the rise of the ridge they came upon a fire smoking at the side of the road. They were passing it without paying much attention to it, when Wing Lung shouted to them. The Chinaman had hastily thrown himself from his motor cycle and was on his knees by the embers examining them.

"Lookee here, quick, Massel Ned," he exclaimed, with vehemence. Clearly something was

significant to the Chinaman about that fire which the boys could not fathom.

"What is it, Wing Lung?" asked Ned, who well knew that the Chinee was not in the habit of exciting himself over trifles.

"This fire built by Chinee," exclaimed Wing Lung; "me heap sabe Chinee build fire allee samee way, no one else build him. Sick man he plentee 'flaid Chinee."

"You mean that you think the Chinaman that the injured man feared came by this way?" asked Ned eagerly.

"Uh-huh; allee samee," grinned Wing Lung, "me velly cleveh Chinee. See here, he use fire cookee gold."

He indicated a bit of tin with some dark stains on it, by the fire side. Near it were some scattered grains that looked like gold.

"Great ginger, Tom," cried Ned, "that puts the injury of our friend back there clearly up to a Chinaman; maybe two or three of 'em. They

came this way and stopped to test the supposed gold they had robbed from him."

"Regular Sherlock Holmes, aren't you?" grinned Tom. "Well, what do you propose to do?"

"Give notice to the authorities to apprehend any Chinamen they may see passing through this way."

"All right; your theory sounds good. Let's push on home and get to a telephone."

But although a bright lookout was kept for the unknown Chinaman, or Chinamen, whom the boys suspected, no trace of any vagrant Mongolians was found; and during the next week the affair of the man in the gulch was almost forgotten in the formation of the "Riding Rovers," a motor cycle touring club, the plans for which had busied the boys not a little since their return from the great Northwest.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIDING ROVERS.

The Riding Rovers' membership was not large, few boys in the vicinity being fortunate enough to possess motor cycles. But, besides Ned and Tom, four other lads belonged to the organization, which, as its prospectus set forth, had for its objects *"the fostering of friendship, the pursuit of exercise and good times awheel."* This phrasing was of Tom's authorship, and of it he was not a little proud.

The four lads who, outside of Ned and Tom, belonged to the Riding Rovers, were all boys from Bayville, the harbor town. There was Nat Nichols, a round-faced, merry sort of youth; Joe Shortridge—otherwise Fatty, on account, of course, of his rotund form; Al Anderson, a boy with an unfortunate proclivity for getting his

words twisted; and last but not least, except in size, Andy Bates, an unusually small lad for his age, sixteen, whose tongue ran away with him. In fact, from the rapidity of his speech he was usually known as "Rapid Fire Andy."

It was one evening not long after the Motor Cycle Chums' discovery of the injured man in the dry arroyo, that the Riding Rovers had foregathered at the Winton ranch for a meeting to discuss plans for a forthcoming tour. A "Grand Tour" was what the rhetorical Tom Chase called it. Discussion was hot as to the direction the tour was to take. Some of the lads were for the mystic land of Lower California, with its cannibal island of Tiburon and strange ranges and valleys. Another was for a trip toward Shasta and the upper parts of the state. Andy Bates, being the smallest, wished to take the longest trip.

"Cross the continent—whizz-bang-never say die—New York—Boston—good time—home

again—steamer—Panama," exploded Andy, in explaining his plans.

As for Al Anderson, his preference was for Arizona.

"Plenty of boycows, I mean cowboys, there," he announced; "gold mines, too, and Indian Apaches, I mean Apache Indians."

"Yes, and sot hands, I mean hot sands," mocked Nat Nichols teasingly, "and——"

But Al looked so threateningly at him that he gave over further teasing, for the time at least.

"Not much to eat in Arizona but rattlesnakes and tarantulas," objected the stout Joe Shortridge.

"Ho! ho! Hark at Fatty, always harping on the eats," came a mocking chorus, and the fat youth subsided.

"Horned toads and hornets, what's the matter with just starting out and riding in one direction as far as we feel like going?" struck in Nat Nich-

ols. "Greasers and grasshoppers, that would be fun! Bet we'd have lots of adventures."

It was at this moment that the telephone bell rang loudly.

"Doctor mans says so be he likee talkee you, Massel Ned," announced Wing Lung, who had answered it.

Ned hastened to the wire. The doctor had for some days past been announcing an improvement in his patient; but he would not, so he said, allow him to talk. Ned hailed this late message as being one of some importance, therefore, and he was not mistaken. After a short conversation he turned from the 'phone with a glowing countenance.

"Hurray, fellows!" he cried, "The Mystery" (this is what they had dubbed the injured man) "has been talking. Tom and myself are to be at the doctor's first thing in the morning. He says he has something important to communicate to us."

Every member of the Riding Rovers knew of "The Mystery," and each was almost as keenly interested in the man's history and identity as the boys themselves.

Following Ned's announcement, the room fairly buzzed with excited talk. Every one of them felt as if he were on the verge of a discovery. In discussing the topic even the vexed question of which direction the tour should take was abandoned. Before they knew it the clock pointed to ten, the fixed hour for the breaking up of the Riding Rovers' meetings.

"Time to quit, boys," announced President Ned, "but we'll meet to-morrow night at seven at Nat Nichols' home in town, and tell you all that we learned about the mystery—how's that?"

A chorus of approval greeted him. The boys rose to their feet, and before parting gave the Riding Rovers' cry in concert. It was not melodious, but what it lacked musically it made up in vim:

"Chug! Chug! C-h-u-g!—Chug! Chug! C-h-u-g!—RIDING ROVERS!—Chug ! Chug! C-h-u-g!"

Right after breakfast the next morning the Red Streak and the Blue Bird whizzed out of the ranch gates, bound for Dr. Duncan's.

"Let's take the shore road," suggested Ned; "it doesn't take much longer and on a morning like this it's a lot nicer than riding through that dusty old valley."

"You're on," agreed Tom; "I always have an affection for that road, anyhow. I rode down it one day richer by five thousand dollars than what I had before, which was just nothing."

The boy referred to his capture of the "Sierra Wolf." He had worn the tin badge of a dishonest school of correspondence for young detectives—a concern to which Tom had sent almost his last money, under an entire misapprehension of its nature. When he found out that it was detective work that was advertised under the al-

luring head of lucrative employment, there was not, perhaps, a more disgusted boy in the country than Tom Chase. Yet, in his case, evil had been turned to good, for with his tin badge—his sole return for his money—he had captured the bandit on whose head was a big reward. This money had saved Tom's mother's ranch from foreclosure and proved the foundation of a flourishing business.

The shore road was a beautiful one. Among redwoods and pines it wound its way along a hillside towering above the blue Pacific. It was but little traveled, despite its beauty, being rough and very steep in places. But the boys made little of its condition.

The Red Streak and the Blue Bird had been tried out on rougher roads and steeper grades. In the great Northwest both lads had pushed their machines over ground previously untraveled except by wiry teams or hardy horsemen. On their Round the World trip, too, they had

triumphed over surprising obstacles. So it was that over grades that stout teams might have balked at they urged their powerful machines, the staccato rattle of the exhausts sounding like volleys of artillery.

They had been riding along a stretch of road, skirting which a dense growth of woods hid the view on the seaward side. Suddenly emerging, they saw spread before them in all its shimmering beauty the vast western ocean, beyond which lay China and the purple east. As if to fit in and harmonize with their thoughts, as they gazed westward across the blue expanse they suddenly became aware of a craft upon it.

An odd enough looking vessel she was, too, though of a type not uncommon along the Pacific coast. Her three masts were stumpy affairs, the highest in the middle, and supported large "lug" sails. The hull, too, was of a queer type, with a high, sharp bow and squat stern with a clumsy-looking "house" superimposed upon it.

"A Chinese junk!" cried Tom, pointing.

"Well, nothing very odd in that. I guess she's from that fishing village above San Pedro," rejoined Ned.

"Yes; but look, there's a boat rowing off to her from the shore."

"Landed for water or something, I suppose," commented Ned, without particular interest.

Had he known, however, who was on board the boat and what they had been about, he might have regarded the junk lying idly on the windless ocean with more concern. As it was, another wooded stretch shortly cut off their view of the sea and they thought no more of the matter.

CHAPTER VI.

TOM FINDS A RELATIVE.

What looked like the ghost of a man lay propped up on pillows in an upper room of Dr. Duncan's house. His face was gaunt and pale, and his hands, as they lay on the coverlet, strangely transparent and thin. But his eyes brightened with a glad light as they fell on the two boys when, dusty from their ride through the Lompos Valley, they entered the room with Dr. Duncan.

"Chilvers," said the doctor, "these are the two young men I was telling you about."

At the name of "Chilvers," Tom Chase started a bit and looked curiously at the man before them, who, for his part, held out one of his wasted hands and smiled wanly.

"I—I don't know how to thank you," he said,

"except in one way, and I'll come to that presently. In the meantime, Tom Chase, does anything about the name Chilvers sound familiar to you?"

"It was my mother's name," said Tom, in wondering tones.

"Exactly; and did you ever hear of Hugh Chilvers?"

"My uncle, who was lost long ago?" gasped Tom, sensing now what was to come.

"My name is Hugh Chilvers," said the other simply; "I'm your uncle, Tom Chase, and that is how——"

"You came to have my name on that scrap of paper! Has the doctor told you all that?" choked out Tom, while Ned, too astonished to speak, stood regarding the scene with wide eyes.

"That's just the way I happened to have your name written down, as you have guessed. In fact, I was on my way to your house when—

when Sing Lee overtook me and what you know about happened."

"I—I don't quite understand——" began Tom, in whom amazement had taken supremacy over all other feelings.

"Exactly. I see you don't. I'm going to explain. You've heard your mother talk of me?"

"Ye-es," rejoined Tom, in a hesitating sort of way that made Ned stare. Well as he knew Tom, he had never heard him speak of any relative but his mother.

"Then you know that when quite young I was wild and headstrong and left home, and from that time to this have never communicated with any of my relatives?"

Tom nodded. He was incapable of speech. Ned and the doctor, side by side, looked on while the wan man on the bed went on:

"Well, I've knocked about all over the world since the time I went away. I've had bad luck and good; but the greatest piece of luck that ever

came my way happened some six months ago. I'd tried my hand at mining in most parts of the world, and in Alaska I met a chap who told me of a wonderful mine somewhere in the Bitter Creek region of the Nevada Desert. That is a region that has been traveled by but few, and of those few a still smaller percentage ever came back to tell the tale."

They were listening intently now. Somehow the boys felt that they were on the verge of hearing something that in the near future would affect themselves tremendously. In this they were not far wrong.

"Well, this chap, Owens was his name, impressed me tremendously. He told of locating a mine of great wealth in the heart of this desert some years before. I'll not go into details now of just how he found it, but at any rate an Indian to whom he had done a kindness told him the legend of the place, and Owens persuaded the

man to accompany him into the heart of the Bitter Creek region on a mission of discovery.

"They didn't find the mine. Lack of water turned them back almost within sight of the range behind which the legend said it lay. The Indian died and Owens, more dead than alive, was picked up by a wandering party of prospectors after enduring hardships that would have killed most men.

"The horrors of the trip back to civilization caused him to lose his nerve; in fact, he was half inclined to look upon the Indian's story as a wild dream. For years he roamed about the world; but all the time he carried with him a roughly sketched map he had made of the route that they had come, and of the strange outline of the hills beyond which the Indian said lay a lost lake and the mine itself.

"When I met him he had just made a big strike in the Klondike, and with prosperity there came back to him again the desire to locate the mine.

I suppose it was the spirit of the pioneer, the craze for adventure, the—call it what you will, but all our early pathfinders possessed it—that ruled him. Owens had taken a great liking to me and he induced me to go into the scheme with him.

"We went to Silver Bow, the nearest railroad station on the Nevada and South Eastern Utah road, and struck out into the desert. Owens' map was a good one, and we got within striking distance of the place without trouble. Pushing on, we eventually reached the mine. It was located on a strange, tower-shaped butte, which stood beside a lake of alkaline water—a sort of Dead Sea.

"There was no question, as we stood there and gazed about us, that the Indian legend was true. The mine had, at some inconceivably remote period, been worked, and worked by miners, too. We knew enough of the business to see that the galleries and shafts that honeycombed the butte

were drilled by men who, however remote their age, understood the science of getting minerals out of the earth.

"I was on fire to investigate the place, but our water had given out. In penetrating the desert we had used a four-horse team attached to a light spring wagon and trailing a big water tank. It was in much the same way that the borax teams used to reach Death Valley before they employed autos on the work.

"When we found the mine but a few scant gallons remained in the tank. Our stock was put on as light an allowance as possible. As for ourselves, we hardly drank more than enough to keep body and soul together. But we had found the mine. That compensated for everything. As we stood there, gazing at it, I verily believe that we clean forgot all about getting back—that is, for a time.

"Realizing our position, we postponed examining the place further, but simply gathered up

some good dust left in an old abandoned sluice cut in primitive fashion out of the living rock. Mixed with the dust were some nuggets, refined in some primitive way from the ore, a moldering pile of which lay not far from the sluice.

"Then we started back half wild with joy over our find. We were rich men, that is, if the interior of the mine was anything like as rich in ore as the 'tailings' without had led us to believe. But poor Owens never did get back. A fever, brought on maybe from drinking the half stale water in the tank, or the heat or something, overtook him. He died in my arms out there under the desert stars, and with his last breath told me to take up the search. With the map he gave me a bit of paper.

" 'It's my last will and testament,' he said.

"I took the paper, and after he had passed on the long trail and I had buried him as well as I could, I read it. It bequeathed the mine to me. The rest of his property went to some relatives

up north. Well, the next day two of the horses died. I had to abandon the wagon, and, packing what water I could in canteens, I pushed on.

"But, as luck would have it, the second day of my long ride to the outposts of humanity, the horse on which I had packed the canteens ran away as I was making camp. I never saw him again. There I was, out on that trackless desert, without water or the means of getting any. I guess I went mad for a while. Anyhow, I ran about screaming and waving my arms like a lunatic. After a while, though, I came to my senses and mounting the remaining horse I rode on. That horse lasted just ten hours. Then he laid down, and in a short time was dead. He had been without water for almost a day and a half, and I had not spared him. I could not afford to. In the distance that I could make toward water lay my hope of life.

"I left the dead horse behind and staggered on. The sun rose and beat down till my skin

felt as dry as parchment. My mouth burned and my tongue appeared to swell till I could hardly breathe. Then must have come desert madness, for I knew nothing more till I found myself in a small shack with a Chinaman bending over me.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE STORY.

"He was a sinister looking individual, above the height of the average Chinaman and with a skin as yellow and dried as a bit of old ivory. However, I knew that in some way he must have saved me from the desert, so, unprepossessing as he was, I regarded him with gratitude. He brought me food and water, but would not let me talk till the next day.

"Then he told me how I had been found reeling along the bank of an old gully where he and some fellow countrymen were working some abandoned claims. This is a common enough practice among Chinamen in that country. They are content to take what the white man leaves. It was to the shanty in which they lived that they had brought me. For twelve hours I had lain

in a stupor, he said, and for a time they feared that I would die.

"To make my story short, I lived with them for three days, till I got my strength back. I am naturally vigorous and by that time I was, though wasted and pale, almost my former self. It was, curiously enough, not until this time that I thought of looking to see if my gold dust and nuggets were secure.

"I chose a time in the evening when the Chinamen were round the cooking fire outside to make my investigation. I have omitted to explain that, like most miners, I carried my specimens and so on in a belt. It's a rough country and it doesn't do to display wealth openly. Well, taking my chance, as I've explained, I took off my belt and opened its various pockets. I found everything intact. Luckily the Chinamen had not suspected in me anything more than a desert-crazed prospector.

"I was about to replace the belt when a shadow

fell across the doorway, blocking the ruddy light from the fire outside. It was the big Chinaman Sing Lee, who had been the first to greet me when I recovered consciousness.

"I had no way of knowing how long he had watched me, but I felt that if he had seen the gold or the map I was in a bad fix. He had three fellow countrymen working with him, and in my weakened state I was no match for them, even had they been unarmed, which was unlikely. I wasn't destined to be long in suspense about whether or no he had seen what my belt contained.

"He gave a shrill cry and from outside his companions came running up. He spoke rapidly to them in Chinese. From the fact that he did not address me at all, I knew that I was in for a struggle. There was a rough and heavily built chair in the room. Before they could make a hostile move I snatched it up and, uttering a ferocious yell, rushed at them.

"The big fellow went down like a nine-pin before my onrush. The other three reached for weapons—knives or pistols, I don't know which—but before they could do anything I swung my chair and over they went too, squealing like so many pigs. I knew that outside they kept a wretched horse, and I made for the rough shed—the wreck of a former mining shack—where they stabled it. I didn't wait for saddle or bridle, but swung myself on its back and, guiding it with the halter, dashed out into the night.

"A fusillade of bullets followed me, but by good luck none of them hit me—Chinamen being notoriously poor marksmen anyway. All that night I rode that poor old animal for all it could do. By dawn I found myself at a 'wooden' town on the edge of a railroad track. Small as the place was, though, it possessed a bank, and I traded in some of my gold dust for money.

"I didn't stay there, but took the next train out, bound for San Francisco, for I was determined

to get capital there and go back to that mine. Single-handed I could do nothing with it. Capital alone could fit out the sort of expedition I required to reach it once more. I spent several weeks in San Francisco, but every capitalist to whom I went with my story laughed at me.

"In fact, in that busy, bustling place, buzzing with street cars, blazing with electric lights, hotels and theaters, the Lost Mine and all connected with it did indeed appear, even at times to myself, like a more or less fantastic dream. Then one night on Kearny Street I came face to face with Sing Lee. I recognized the man instantly. I saw by a flash in his eyes that he knew me, too. But he made no sign. From that day on, however, I knew that I was always followed by some impalpable shadow. Not a movement of mine went unwatched. I dared not trust myself off the well-lighted thoroughfares. From the fact that Sing Lee was following me so persistently I knew that he surmised that I had found a desert

mine. From the specimens he had seen he must have known it was a rich one and that in all probability I carried a map or something of the kind with me.

"If I could have recorded the mine I would have done so. But I could not, for I hadn't an accurate enough survey of it to file at the U. S. Assayers' office. Lacking the filing of a claim, the mine of course belonged to the first who recorded it, and I knew that Sing Lee meant to be that first.

"My second encounter with Sing Lee was on the steps of a bank. I knew then, or rather guessed it, that he had been seeking some white man's aid in his effort to force my secret from me. I looked at the name on the bank. It was Henderson & Co., a familiar enough name to me. I recognized the firm as having been connected with innumerable shady mining deals. Sing Lee's face was like a mask as he passed me, but

I knew, as well as if I had heard the conversation, what he had been to see the firm about.

"In the meantime my money was running lower and lower. I had traded in almost all my gold dust, but I still kept a little and one nugget, for it was all I had to prove my assertions. The map I had prudently left with a friend, whom I knew I could trust, the first night I reached 'Frisco. It was when my finances were at the lowest ebb that I happened to see your name in the paper, Tom, as being one of a number of boys to form the pioneer motor cycle club of California. It printed your picture, too, and from your likeness to your mother I knew you must be my nephew.

"I had heard of my sister's marriage to Remington Chase and knew that she was living in California, but although I had several times tried to locate her by newspaper personals, I had never succeeded. Now I was delighted at the chance to meet her once more, for, as you know, she is,

except myself, the sole surviving member of our family. I determined to seek you out the next day. But on the train my pocket was picked, and when I reached the junction where I had to purchase another ticket for San Benito, I found that my resources were nil.

"It was only a tramp of fifty miles or so, however, and I had done more than that many a time in Alaska and other places. So I set out on foot. I had no idea that I was being followed, but such must have been the case, for as I was crossing that valley where you found me I heard stealthy footsteps behind me. Looking round, I saw Sing Lee and two other Chinamen. Before I could make a move to defend myself one of them brought down a club on the back of my head with terrific force. Once more he struck me and everything went black. That's all I know till I woke up here and the doctor told me about all that had happened. As for the bit of paper, which he told me puzzled you so much, I wrote

your name on it before I left San Francisco and placed it in my pocket."

"But the gold dust?" asked Tom, waking up from the spell into which the strange narrative had cast him.

"You mean the brass dust," smiled his uncle, "and the brass nugget? That was a little trick of mine to fool those Chinese in case they ever did rob me. I obtained the filings and the brass nugget from my friend with whom I left the map. He is an engineer. As for the real nuggets and gold dust, I hid them in my shoes. The doctor will tell you that they are the genuine article."

"They are as fine specimens as I have ever seen," declared the doctor, to whom Hugh Chilvers had, of course, previously related his story.

"But—but don't the Chinamen know that they have been fooled?" demanded Ned.

"They may by this time," was the miner's re-

ply, "but at any rate the map is in safe hands. They cannot touch that."

The doctor at this juncture forbade his patient to say more. The boys followed him from the room after Tom had bade an affectionate farewell to his newly found uncle and promised to telegraph his mother in the East all about the strange happenings attending his return.

"Mr. Chilvers says that he is sure the Chinese have been thrown off the trail," the doctor observed, when they were seated on the porch, "but I am by no means so sure. He argues that because they found no map on him, they will conclude that one does not exist. I am not so sure of this. They would not have followed him so persistently or resorted to the lengths they have, unless they had some strong reasons—a motive stronger than a few pinches of gold dust."

The boys agreed with their friend and then the recollection of the junk suddenly flashed across Ned's mind.

"Do you think there was anything suspicious in that?" he asked the doctor when he had told him of what they had seen that morning.

"I don't know. But of one thing I am certain —we have not heard the last of Sing Lee and his precious companions," was the grave rejoinder.

As the boys were leaving late that afternoon with a promise to return the next day, the doctor thrust some papers into Ned's hands.

"I forgot to deliver these to Mr. Chalmers, my real-estate agent in Bayville, yesterday," he said, "and it is important that they reach him to-day. As you lads are going to attend the meeting of the Riding Rovers in town to-night, will you see that he gets them?"

"We'll be glad to," said Ned, as he thrust the papers into his pocket.

"What was that?" cried Tom suddenly at the same instant.

"What?" asked both his astonished listeners.

"Over there!" cried Tom, pointing to a shrub-

bery of Cherokee roses. "I'm sure I saw something move, or rather dart away."

"Nonsense," laughed the doctor; "I'll have to give you something for your nerves, Master Tom. It must have been the breeze down the canyon."

Tom said no more about the matter; but to himself he repeated his assertion:

"Something moved and darted off as the doctor handed those papers to Ned. I'm sure of it as I am that I'm a foot high," he murmured stubbornly as he and Ned "tuned up" their machines.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO TROUBLE.

It was a pleasant evening and the boys rode leisurely along, drinking in the cool air, refreshingly crisp with the breeze from the Pacific, which at that time of the day and year makes the California coast a place of delight. Naturally enough as they rode they discussed the strange, almost extravagant, story they had heard.

"And to think that Hugh Chilvers is my uncle, Ned!" exclaimed Tom wonderingly. "I can hardly believe that it isn't all a dream."

"It's no dream, Tom, old boy, and what's more, I'm willing to bet the hole out of a doughnut that before you are much older you'll be off across the Nevada desert in search of that lost mine. I saw your eyes light up as your uncle talked of it."

"That's a fact, Ned. What an adventure that would be! Think of that old aboriginal mine lying unworked all these years and discovered again by the act of a grateful Indian. It's like a fairy tale."

"And yet Mr. Chilvers is not, I should judge, a man given to imagining things."

"Rather the other way, as it impressed me," rejoined Tom. "I don't doubt but that before long he will be a rich man."

"Yes, and then his sole desire, so he said, would be to make things as nice as possible for you and your mother to make up for his long years of silence and neglect," rejoined Ned, referring to a part of the conversation at Dr. Duncan's that we have not recorded.

"I guess mother will be more interested in finding her brother once more than in the prospect of any wealth he means to settle on her," was Tom's reply. "How often she has talked of him!

What a surprise she will have when she gets my telegram!"

"Let's ride round by San Benito and send a night-letter to her. You can say almost as much as in a letter, and it goes by wire."

"That's a good idea, Ned. Let's do that. After all, it won't take us much out of our way, and there's a moon to-night, too, so that we shall have a pleasant ride home."

As Tom had observed, it was not a long ride into San Benito and before long they were whizzing through the single street of the little town. A bright light shone on the sign of the Western Union Telegraph Company's office and presently both boys were within, bending their heads together over a joint composition which strove to comprise within the limits of a "night letter" all that Tom had to tell.

It was not an easy task to condense it all, but, at length, they had set down, on the blanks provided, a fairly comprehensive account of what

had occurred. This done, they lost no time in filing the dispatch and setting off once more for home.

"Will you ever forget the time that Ben Bell stove holes in our gasolene tanks?" asked Tom, as they sped past the shed in which the two motor cycles had been stored on that memorable occasion.

"Not likely. Particularly the incidents that followed it,—that rope across the road and the big boulder he hurled down on us."

"That led to some exciting adventures, old fellow."

"It did, indeed."

"I wonder will we ever have any more like them."

"I hope so—that is, part of them."

"That's right. Part of the time we had pretty strenuous work with that precious outfit."

"But still, it's all good fun to look back on."

"To tell you the truth, I'm getting rather tired

of sticking round at home," resumed Tom after a pause. "It isn't as if I could be useful. The boss of the ranch knows so much more than I do that I feel it would be presumption in me to try to make any suggestions, and the place is paying finely, too."

"When are you going to college, Tom?" asked Ned presently.

"Next year. So are you."

"Yes, to Leland Stanford. But, in the meantime, I find that time hangs heavy on my hands, too."

"Same here. I wish we could get up some sort of a trip."

"So do I. Let's get together and we'll fix things up for the Riding Rovers to make a grand tour."

"Like we were talking about last night? Well, it will all come up at the meeting to-night."

"The trouble is to get the fellows to agree on one place."

"I've got a place in mind."

"You have?"

"Yes; I've been thinking about it for the last hour."

"Funny, I had an idea of a good destination for a trip of that kind, too."

"Wonder if we were thinking of the same thing?"

"Maybe; where were you planning to go?"

"Where were you?"

Both boys intuitively guessed each other's thoughts at the same instant. Their lips parted in a jubilant shout.

"The Lost Mine!"

At the moment of their discovery that they had been thinking of the same thing, the two boys were turning into the road that led across a rise to the Winton ranch. The track was a steep one, and the necessity of applying more spark and gas for the time being checked further conversation.

The road climbed steadily upward among forests of sweet smelling redwood and mandrono brush, interspersed here and there with clumps of fragrant mountain laurel. It was like riding through a sweet-scented tunnel. Overhead the trees met and formed an arch that made the comparison an apt one.

Puffing steadily, the two motor cycles climbed the rise.

"Cracky, Tom, the old Red Streak and Blue Bird are doing themselves proud to-night," observed Ned presently.

"Yes, they're dandy old machines."

"That's right, I wouldn't change mine for the finest one built."

"Mine *is* the finest one built," declared Tom with deep conviction.

"Both of them have carried us into and out of many adventures."

"They surely have, and I hope that they'll carry us into many more."

Had Tom been a prophet of old, his words could not have been more significant of events that were to come to pass almost immediately.

Through interstices in the interlaced branches above their heads, the yellow moon shone down brightly, making a brilliant patchwork of black and white on the dusty road. At last they topped the hill, and through the end of the woodland tunnel they saw stretched out before them the Pacific. The moon was blazing a brilliant trail of silver across the placid water.

"What's that dark object afloat out there?" asked Ned as his eyes traveled with delight over the wondrously beautiful scene.

"What? Off there to the north, right in the path of the moonlight?"

"Yes; that's it."

"Why, it's—it's that Chinese junk again!"

"So it is. I wonder——"

But just what Ned wondered was destined never to be known, for, at that instant, several

dark forms glided as if by magic from both sides of the road. In a flash Ned saw that they were Chinamen. In the moonlight their yellow faces, flat noses and slit eyes looked terribly repulsive.

"Ride, Tom! Ride for your life!" cried Ned, sensing, he knew not just how, that danger menaced them.

Tom applied power at Ned's word, and both engines crackled and roared like machine guns. But as the motor cycles sprang forward like live things, they suddenly halted and wobbled. At the same instant came sharp sounds like revolver shots, followed by an ominous hissing.

"The tires have gone! They've strewn glass on the road!" cried Ned.

Before he could say more, he felt himself seized and something thrown over his head. As its soft folds enveloped him and he felt his hands being tied, he heard as if in a dream a muffled cry from Tom, which was checked as abruptly as it began.

So totally unexpected, so utterly inexplicable was the attack, that Ned, as he felt himself hurried away, found himself wondering if he were awake, or if he should not presently wake up in bed and find himself the victim of a nightmare.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DARK.

Presently to Ned's nostrils came a sickly, cloying odor that made him choke up. He struggled to wave away whatever it was that was being held close to his face, from outside the bag; but his hands were tightly tied, a fact which he had forgotten till that instant. Fight against the strange aroma as he would he felt it overpowering him. It reminded him of some gas that he once had taken at a dentist's when a recalcitrant tooth had to be removed.

In a dreamy maze Ned felt his senses waver; he knew that he began to sway dizzily and that somebody caught him up and lifted him from the ground. A wave of nausea engulfed him and then, with a fearful roaring in his ears, like the rumble of a heavy train across a trestle, the

lad's senses went out. The last thing he recollected was being hurried forward over the ground by somebody who had picked him up.

How much later it was that he awoke he did not know. He found himself in pitchy darkness and lying on what, to his investigating fingers, felt like a coarse mat of some sort. A heavy, stuffy smell was in the air and Ned's head ached intolerably. His wrists, too, pained him, and it was in thinking about them that he suddenly recalled all that had occurred just previous to his strange abduction.

It all came back distinctly to him: the ride through the leafy tunnel, the shimmering panorama of the moonlit Pacific, the sudden glimpsing of the apparitions that arose, as if by magic, from the deeper shadows at the roadside, and then the mad burst of speed and the collapse of the tires. Then came the recollection of the sweet, cloying smell, of his brief ineffectual

struggle against the overpowering fumes, and then a blank which he could not supply.

But where could he be? Rising to his feet, he staggered dizzily about for a minute till his head became clearer. Then, with hands extended, he began blundering about in the darkness.

It was more than darkness. It was so black that it could actually be felt, like an odd, velvety touch. Some of you may have felt the same thing on getting up in a dark room.

"Well, if this doesn't beat all," mused Ned, as for an instant he stood still, after vainly trying to find some finite bounds to the blackness that encompassed him.

"So far as I know, I haven't an enemy in this part of the country, and yet here are Tom and I kidnapped like this for no earthly reason that I can think of."

He paused, trying to steady his nerves and think clearly, for his head hurt him intolerably.

"Tom? Let's see; I heard him call out and

then—it's no use, I cannot recall any more. I wonder if he is in this place, too."

Determined to put the matter to a test, Ned raised his voice.

"*Tom!*" he cried, at first cautiously.

His voice rang hollowly back at him, but no reply came. Growing bolder he gave a louder cry:

"TOM!"

Still no answer.

"Tom can't be here," mused the lad, and then forcing his voice to its highest pitch he sent it ringing into the close blackness:

"TOM!"

He paused a second, but, like his previous effort, this final shout produced no answer. Ned began to feel an odd sensation of alarm. A sort of chill crept up and down his backbone. He felt his scalp tighten. It was as if he had been buried alive and awakened in some vault. An odd,

musty sort of smell in the air enhanced the illusion.

"Wherever can I be?" cried Ned in sheer desperation. He set off once more through the blackness, keeping his hands stretched out in front of him. Suddenly he collided with a wall. He felt it up and down and then tapped it. It echoed as hollowly as had his voice in that dark place.

"It's wood," whispered Ned to himself in a low voice.

"'s-wood!" his words went echoing off behind him. Ned decided then and there not to voice his thoughts any more. The sound of that whispering, muttering echo was too much for even his ordinarily stout nerves.

Ned felt along the wall cautiously till, by counting the corners, he made sure that he must have walked around the entire apartment, which he judged, by his sense of touch, to be square. Apparently also, judging from the hollow sound

a voice made within it, the chamber, or whatever it was, was empty. It rang just like an empty house. And yet somehow Ned had a feeling that he was not in a house.

Determining, however, to put the question to a test by seeing if he could encounter any furniture, he set off courageously into the blackness once more. As nearly as he could estimate his course lay across the center of the place.

Suddenly Ned brought up with a jerk, urged by he knew not just what instinct. Dropping to his hands and knees he cautiously felt in front of him.

A sharp chill of horror ran through him and his throat contracted dryly, as the next instant he realized that only Providence had saved him from taking a plunge into he knew not what depths of space. In front of him the floor ended abruptly and some sort of trap-door yawned. One step more and, had it not been for his mysterious intuition of danger, Ned must have

plunged through it. Of course he had no means of knowing just how far he would have fallen, but the thought of plunging into those unknown depths threw him into a cold perspiration.

Mastering his momentary panic, Ned started back for the friendly wall. He resolved to try no more exploring tours. He must have missed his way, however, for on his return progress his foot encountered a soft mass on the floor.

In some alarm Ned jumped back. He had no idea what it could be that his foot had struck. It had an odd sort of soft, yielding feeling. He was not to remain long in suspense. The hollow echoes of the place were suddenly set in motion by a low groan.

"Oh, Jee-hos-ophat, but I'm sick!" came a voice.

"Tom!" cried Ned, realizing now that it was his chum's recumbent form that he had stumbled across.

Through the darkness Tom's voice came back drowsily.

"Why, it's Ned! Strike a light, Ned! It's—SAY! where in the world are we?"

"I've no idea, Tom. Don't you recall being stopped and carried off?"

"Oh, say, I do now. Gracious, but my head aches! They gave me some stuff that put me to sleep, I guess."

"They did the same to me. Say, Tom, have you got a match?"

The question was a momentous one. Although we have not mentioned it, of course Ned had long since searched in vain for a lucifer. A pause followed his question. It was plain that Tom was searching his pockets. At last came a triumphant cry.

"I've found three in my coat pocket."

"Tom, you're a jewel! Give them to me."

"Where are you, anyhow? I can't see a thing."

"Nor can I. Just wave your hand about. Our hands will meet if we keep it up long enough."

Both boys extended their arms to full length and began feeling about in the inky blackness. At last their fingers met. Tom slipped the precious three matches into Ned's keeping.

"Now, then, light up, old fellow, and let's see where we are."

"All right; but I'm going to be precious careful. You know what always happens to the fellow who has only one match left."

Sputter! Flash!

A yellow flame glared up and illumined the blackness. Bit by bit, as Ned held the precious sliver of pine wood aloft, the dark recesses of the place leapt out of the shadows. A simultaneous shout of astonishment burst from both boys.

"We're on board a ship!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SEARCH BEGINS.

The Riding Rovers waited at Nat Nichols' house till long past the hour at which Ned and Tom had promised they would put in an appearance.

"Scorpions and succotash!" vociferated Nat at length, "this is the first time those chaps ever disappointed us."

"Maybe they stopped to eat on the way," suggested Joe Shortridge hungrily.

"Gracious, Fatty, is that the only thing you can think of that would delay anybody?" demanded Nat.

"Tires bust—pop! bang!—stop to fix—off again—soon here!" exploded Andy in a series of gasps.

"That's more likely, Andy," allowed Al An-

derson, "tusted bires—I mean, busted tires—take quite a time to fix."

"Well, we'll wait a while," announced Nat, "and then if they don't show up—carburetors or corn fritters, I'm going to bed."

But half an hour passed and then an hour, during which they discussed their latest experiences with their motor cycles, but still no Ned or Tom arrived.

"Raisins and rattlesnakes, but I don't like the look of this," declared Nat at length. "Tell you what, fellows, I'm going to call up the Winton ranch and see if they know anything about them there."

Accordingly, he left the room, but returned a few minutes later with a blank face.

"I had Wing Lung on the 'phone," he announced, "but he says that they haven't been there, nor have they sent any message."

"Mighty funny," commented Joe Shortridge; "haven't they been home for supper even?"

"No!" snapped out Nat.

"Tell you what—call doctor—went there—he'll know!" Thus Andy Bates in his usual "firecracker" way.

"Not a bad idea, Andy, I'll do it," said Nat.

But this proved to be as blank a lead as the other. All the doctor could tell them was that their two chums had left his house some hours ago, and should certainly have been heard from by that time. Nat began to look really worried. He knew that the two Motor Cycle Chums were strong, self-reliant lads, but still, hold-ups were things not unknown in that part of the country, and he felt that something of the sort might have happened to his two friends.

"We'll call this meeting off now," he announced, after the case had been discussed at some length, "but we'll meet in the morning and find out what's become of them."

"Sorry—can't come—work in store—father

needs me," sputtered Andy, who helped out in his father's general store.

"Same here," announced Joe regretfully; "big mail to-morrow. I've got to work hard."

Joe's father kept a hardware establishment in which was located the post office, and it was one of Joe's duties to aid in sorting the mail on "heavy days."

"Then it'll be you and me Al," declared Nat, turning to Al Anderson.

Al nodded.

"I'll be here on the Freen Glyer—I mean the Green Flyer—at eight o'clock sharp," he said.

"All right. I'll have the Road Runner tuned up and waiting," rejoined Nat.

At the appointed hour next morning Al came chugging into the Nichols' yard on a green two-cylindered machine. Nat was waiting for him with his Road Runner, a powerful motor cycle painted black with nickel trimmings.

"I've had the doctor on the 'phone this morn-

ing already," Nat announced after the two lads had exchanged greetings. "Of course I called the Winton ranch first. That Chinee is half crazy. The boys haven't showed up all night."

Al drew a long face.

"Gee whitakers! What can have happened?" he gasped.

"Don't know. It's up to us to find out. The local police force has been notified, but—hammocks and handcuffs—they couldn't detect the fleas on a hound dog."

"Well, what did the doctor say?" asked Al, ignoring this thrust at the local authorities.

"That the boys had left his house about dusk last night. He thought they were going to San Benito to send a night letter to Tom's mother about an amazing discovery—I'll tell you about that later. After that he was pretty sure that they meant to take the branch road home, have supper and come on to the meeting."

"Let's call up the Western Union Office at Ban

Senito—I mean San Benito—and find out if they were really there at all."

"That's the idea. Just take a look at my machine and see that she's all right while I run in and 'phone."

Nat was out again in a few seconds looking more puzzled than ever.

"They were there, all right," he said, "and sent a night letter east."

"Then we'd better search the other road for a trace of them."

"Just what I was going to propose. Come on, Al, we've got to get a wiggle on us."

The two motor cycles sped smoothly out of the yard and through the streets of the little town. Time was, when the lads on their swiftly moving machines created all sorts of excitement. But that was all past now. Hardly any one on the streets gave them more than a passing look as they sped quickly by. A close observer, however, would have noticed that on this day the

face of each motor cycle boy wore a look of exceptional and almost grim determination.

Half an hour later they were standing, dismounted, at the entrance to the leafy tunnel where Ned and Tom had met with their adventure the night before. Trampled brush, a glass-strewn road and footsteps in all directions indicated plainly enough that a struggle of some sort had taken place there. Suddenly, back in the brush a gleam of scarlet caught Nat's sharp eye. He plunged into the scrub growth and an instant later announced with a shout that he had found the two motor cycles—the Blue Bird and the Red Streak.

"Something terrible must have happened to Ned and Tom," he gasped out as he stood once more by Al's side. "Sugar and centipedes, I can't make it out at all! Did you find any trace of their fate, or a clew to their whereabouts in the road, Al?"

Al, who had been industriously searching about

in the trampled dust of the road, shook his head.

"Nothing," he said; "it looks as if——" he broke off suddenly and listened intently.

"What's that?" demanded Nat, whose ears also caught the sound that had arrested Al's attention.

"It's a cotor mycle—I mean a motor cycle," he said.

"Coming this way, too. My, whoever it is is putting on speed! Who can it be?"

CHAPTER XI.

A MONGOLIAN DETECTIVE.

They were not left long in doubt. Round the corner, his loose blue blouse and trousers flapping in the wind like ultramarine sails, came Wing Lung on his "pop-pop bike." His ordinarily mask-like countenance was agitated, and as he saw the boys he gave a shout.

"You findee them—so be?"

"No; but we've found their machines, Wing," responded Nat in an agitated voice.

"Hum! You waitee minute—so be."

The Chinaman brought his machine to a stop and deftly dismounted, leaning the old "one-lunger," which was tied up with tape and string, carefully against a tree.

"You stoppee there one piece time, Lattel-

snake," he said, addressing the ramshackle old affair.

"Rattlesnake?" demanded Nat questioningly. "Dates and dictionaries, where did you get that name?"

"Him allee timee lattle, lattle, lattle, then go likee one stleak blue blazee. Me callee him lattle-snake—so be," announced Wing, without a smile.

He cast his keen, slit-like eyes rapidly over the ground. In every direction among the trampled tracks he ran. Like a sleuth hound, his snub nose close to the ground, he circulated, observing everything. Finally he straightened up with a look of triumph.

"Me sabee," he declared. "Chinamen, they takee boys."

"Chinamen! What in the world would they take them for?" gasped Nat. "Noodles and nicotine, you'll have to think up something better than that."

"Me no foolee," declared Wing Lung indig-

nantly, "you lookee here. One piecee track. Wear shoe allee same Chinaman."

"That's so," Nat was forced to admit; "see here, Al, some of these tracks are just like the ones Wing makes with his shoes."

"Sulest thing you knowee," grinned Wing.

He began running hither and thither, and finally made a dart for the edge of the cliff. Down it he climbed, the boys following him, clinging to brush, finding a foothold on rocks and finally reaching the bottom none the worse for a few scratches. As they reached the foot of the cliff, Wing gave a cry of triumph. In the sand they saw the prints of many unmistakably Chinese feet. The odd-shaped tracks identified them beyond a doubt.

Wing's next discovery was the place where the Chinamen's boat had lain.

"Lilly boat, he lie here one piece time, so be," he declared, indicating a spot in the sand where a small boat's keel had grated.

"You think they were carried off in a boat?" asked Nat, who, by this time, was beginning to have quite a respect for the Chinese's powers as a detective.

"Lilly boat catchum. Take them by big boat," rejoined Wing. "Mee velly cleveh Chinee, so be."

"But what good does it do us to know that they were carried off in a big boat, if we don't know where they are now?" protested Nat. "Rudders and roller skates, I don't see that we are much further than when we started."

Wing Lung laid one long-nailed finger at the side of his putty nose. He smiled a smile of Oriental cunning.

"You waitee one piecee," he said! "no hully. You sabee San Pedro, allee samee Chinee fishmen lib there?"

"Yes, it's about ten miles north of here," rejoined Nat. "Why?"

"We takee lilly lide there."

"You think they have taken the boys there?"

"Me no sabee. We go see. Maybe there, maybe not there. We findee out one piece quick."

"Can't be too quick for me," declared Al, starting back up the cliff.

A short time later the oddly assorted trio, the two boys and the Chinaman, were racing over the level road that led north toward the marshes and salt meadows, amid which the village of San Pedro was located. It was rather a remarkable place, this San Pedro. In the early days, as its name indicated, it had been a mission town. The ruins of the mission, put there by the old padres, still remained; but the town itself had long since been abandoned by all but Chinese fishermen, who, with Italians, monopolized the industry on that part of the California coast. As has been said, their junks—for they will use no other type of boat—form a common feature of the waterscapes thereabouts.

In due time, the three motor cyclists came within view of the desolate stretch of salt mead-

ows, intersected by deep salt-water creeks, that surround San Pedro. The village itself is on an island, on which the old mission forms a prominent object of the landscape. The island lies back about half a mile from the sea, and is surrounded by a creek which at high water only is navigable. At low tide the junks of the fishermen lie picturesquely in the mud.

Beyond the salt meadows, which were spotted with grass hummocks, lay a range of sand dunes like miniature mountains, full of valleys and hills, with stiff, spiky grass covering them instead of trees. Beyond the dunes again lay the Pacific, with the brown sails of one or two junks visible in the distance. The village itself, a huddle of ruinous shacks, fish nets and piles of rotting débris, lay on the other side of the island from where the motor cyclists stood regarding it.

It was a dreary outlook. Although the sun shone brightly, the salt meadows, which stretched far back inland between two steep ranges of

rocky hills, looked dismal and forsaken. Not a sign of life was to be seen. The ruined mission on the summit of the island and the junks far out at sea were the only evidences of human life within sight.

"Now we hide pop-pop bikees and then we think what we do next," declared Wing Lung.

The boys obeyed without demur. In fact, this "cleveh Chinee," as he modestly called himself, was beginning to appear to them in a new light. He had shown himself to be a skillful, self-reliant general, and they waited with anxiety—after they had concealed the motor cycles in some brush—to hear what he had to say next. When he did speak he astonished them.

"You takee bikees. Back along that road you findee one piece five, six mile, lilly town. Go one store by. Catchee plentee eat. Clackers, cannee meat, eblyt'ing. Then you comee back here. Hide bikees. Waitee."

"Why, are we going to be here a long time?" asked Al in some wonderment.

"Maybe. Me no sabee. Bimeby you get hungly. Want eat. Must hab glub. You go catch. Then come back. You sabee?"

Nat nodded.

"But what are you going to do, Wing?" he asked, puzzled at the Chinaman's attitude, although it was plain enough that he had formed some plan.

"Me go by one piece San Pedlo. Find out number one chop if boys be there. You get glub. Come back here, waitee me. No talk no one."

Before they could speak he was off, gliding in and out among the coarse salt grass like a snake. The last thing they heard him say was, as if to himself:

"Me velly cleveh Chinee."

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE PRISON.

The match that Ned had lighted flickered and died out, plunging the two lads once more into darkness. But during the brief illumination of the place of their imprisonment, Ned had cast anxious eyes about for the hole down which he had so narrowly escaped tumbling. It was a hatchway about six feet square in the middle of the "hold," for from what they could judge that was the part of the ship in which they were confined.

Following the dying out of the match, which Ned had held till it scorched his fingers, came an anxious consultation. Would it be wise to light another and reconnoiter the place more thoroughly, or was it their best plan to wait on in the darkness till somebody came? They finally

decided to risk the chance of wasting another match. Both felt that they could endure the darkness better if they had a more comprehensive idea of their surroundings.

Accordingly, Ned kindled another lucifer. As it flared up, Tom gave a cry of joy and darted for a niche in the beamed and timbered wall.

"Look, Ned," he cried, "if this isn't luck!"

He held out a candle, a thick yellow affair of tallow, probably left in the hold the last time cargo had been stowed. They lost no time in lighting it, and it was wonderful what a cheering effect it had on their spirits.

"Now for a good look about the place," cried Ned, holding the guttering "dip" above his head.

But the steadier and stronger light did not show much that the match had not revealed. Heavy timbers, evidently ribs, ran at regular intervals up the planked sides of their prison place. And now they noticed that in a bulkhead at one end was a door.

"Probably locked," commented Tom, "but we'll leave that till later. Now let's have a look down into that hole you almost fell into," for Ned had related to his chum this part of his adventures.

Peering over the edge they gazed down into the hole. The rays of the candle revealed a dark pit, through which heavy timbers, converging toward a central point, were easily discernible.

"That must be a lower hold, and that heavy timber is the keel," decided Ned. "The point now is, what kind of a ship are we on?"

"Well, not on one manned by any friends of ours, that's certain," declared Tom rather grimly.

"No; but, look here, Tom, there's a ladder leading into that lower hold, for I'm sure that's what it is. What do you say if we climb down and take a look about us?"

"Just what I was going to suggest. We might find some way to get out. At any rate, it can't do any harm."

The two lads cautiously clambered down the

ladder and, for an instant, paused midway in alarm. From the dark recesses of that lower hold had come a mysterious sound—a rustling and scampering that at first neither could account for.

"Scared, Ned?" asked Tom, as his chum hung back.

"Rats!" retorted Ned the next minute.

"That's just what they are," laughed Tom, who, despite their serious position, was amused at Ned's answer, "millions of them I should think."

"Thousands, anyhow. Come on, Tom."

The two boys stumbled along the bottom of the ship, clambering over timbers and planks.

"We must be past that bulkhead above us by this time," observed Ned presently. "I wonder if this hold runs the length of the ship?"

"I guess it must. We'll keep on, anyhow."

A few paces further brought them to a ladder

which led upward. Here they paused. As if he guessed Ned's thoughts, Tom turned to him.

"Well, shall we try it?" he asked.

"Might as well," responded Ned; "we can't be any worse off than we are, and I'm dying for something to eat."

At this instant something made him think of the papers that Dr. Duncan had entrusted to him. He felt in his pocket. They were gone!

"I don't see why any one should have kidnapped us for those," commented Tom, when this information had been imparted to him. "I understood Dr. Duncan to say that they were simply for the purpose of recording a deed. What possible use could they be to anybody?"

"Jiggered if I know. It's all a mystery to me," was Ned's answer.

Suddenly Tom thought of the furtive face he was certain that he had seen among the Cherokee roses.

"I wonder if that had anything to do with our

present troubles," he thought to himself. But he said nothing to Ned. In fact, at that moment both boys had plenty to occupy their minds without indulging in speculation.

They began mounting the ladder. At the top they found an open hatchway just like the one by which they had descended. Climbing through it, they found themselves in another bare, empty hold. At one end, however, a shaft of sunlight poured down through an opening, which evidently gave on to the deck of the craft, whatever she was.

A ladder led up to this hatch. Tom looked at it a minute in silence, then he said:

"Anything is better than this suspense. I'm going to climb that ladder and find out where we are."

Ned demurred to this. He urged that such an act might lead to even more serious trouble than they were then in. But Tom was obdurate.

"Anything is better than this suspense," he de-

clared again. "For all we know, we may be out at sea."

"Hardly, or we'd feel the motion. Well, go ahead, Tom, but, for gracious sake, be careful."

"Trust me. Here, hold this candle while I'm gone."

Tom handed the flickering candle to Ned and was off. Ned, with a beating heart, watched him climb the ladder and vanish into the square of sunlight at its summit. As he waited there, he expected at any instant to hear sounds of a struggle or indications that Tom was in trouble, and he picked up a billet of wood that lay in one corner of the hold.

But a long interval passed, during which Ned could almost hear the pounding of his own heart, and nothing happened. He began to get worried. What could have happened to Tom? The more he speculated about it the more anxious he became. At length Ned determined, at whatever hazard, to end his suspense.

Blowing out the candle, he placed it in his pocket and carefully ascended the ladder up which Tom had climbed. Arriving at the top he cautiously protruded his head. He found that the hatch was behind a big cask, seemingly a water barrel. No one was in sight, so far as Ned's observation extended. He looked about him curiously.

His first look satisfied him that they were on board no other vessel than a Chinese junk. He could see the stumpy masts and the odd-shaped bulwarks. Bits of red paper—warnings to devils to keep away—were pasted up here and there. The furled matting sails told him that they were at anchor. His observation only extended to the bow, however. The stern was blocked out from view by the big cask.

Ned's curiosity now began to get the better of his prudence. He determined to know what was going on and where they were. He, of course, had no knowledge of how long he had remained

insensible, and for all he knew they might have traveled a long way down or up the coast.

As silently as he could he worked his way around the big cask and found himself blocked by a big coil of rope.

He was about to raise himself and peer over the top of this when something happened that almost made him give a loud cry of alarm and discover himself to whoever might be about.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder, and the next instant another hand was clapped over his mouth.

CHAPTER XIII.

"NO THOROUGHFARE!"

"Stay still, Ned! It's me—Tom!"

What a relief it was to Ned to hear his chum's voice! Tom took his hand from Ned's lips as soon as he had spoken, and Ned looked around at him.

"Where in the world did you come from?" he asked in the same low, cautious tones that Tom had made use of.

"From the other side of that coil of rope. Whatever possessed you to come up on deck?"

"Couldn't help it, Tom. Thought something must have happened to you. I came heeled, though."

Ned flourished his billet of timber.

"Gracious! Glad you didn't see me first and think I was a Chink!"

"So am I," grinned Ned. "I was out for blood, I can tell you. Crackey, Tom, when I felt you grab me I thought it was all off. Wonder you wouldn't warn a fellow."

"Warn you? How on earth did I dare to speak any louder than we are talking now? Listen!"

Tom held up an admonitory finger. Ned, straining his ears, caught a sing-song buzz of talk.

"It's the Chinese!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; but they might as well be in China for all that I can make out of their conversation. I wish we had Wing Lung here."

"So do I. But say, Tom, can't we get a look at them?"

"Sure thing. Come round to this side of the coil of rope. I've been watching them from there for almost an hour. They've been jabbering like so many monkeys, but don't seem to have got any further."

"I shouldn't wonder if they are discussing us."

"That's just what I thought. But come round here and take a peek. Easy now. Of course they think we are safe under lock and key in that black hole down below, but it's no use taking chances."

Tom threw himself on his stomach and wiggled round the coil of rope. Ned followed his example. Beyond the coil was a sort of rough windlass. Half hidden by a balk of timber belonging to this apparatus, the boys could gaze their fill at the after deck of the junk without much danger of detection. At all events, come what might, Ned felt that it was much more comfortable on deck in the fresh air than in that abominably stuffy and dark hole below.

Squatting on the deck, where it took a raise aft to form a sort of cabin, the boys saw a group of particularly ill-favored Chinamen. They wore all sorts of garments. Some were dressed in oil-skin shirts and cloth trousers, with big fisher

boots, and red handkerchiefs knotted about their heads. Others wore fur-trimmed caps, and the loose blouse and pantaloons of their fatherland. They differed materially from the soft-voiced, gentle-mannered irrigation coolies that the boys were familiar with. Their rough fisher-life had made them almost ferocious looking. In the belt that each wore was visible a knife. This blade was nothing more than the ordinary sailor's implement, but somehow the coarse, sinister faces of the Chinamen made even such weapons take on a menacing look.

Three of the Chinamen alone differed from the others, in that they wore better garments and appeared to be less wild and rugged. One of these was a giant of a man for a Chinaman, for the Mongolians, as a rule, are not remarkable for stature. His companions clustered about him as if they regarded him as a sort of leader.

This individual had in his hands a bundle of papers over which they all were jabbering and

gesticulating. It was hard to make out any part of their conversation. It appeared to be a monotonous sing-song which, even had the boys understood the language, they would have found difficult to break up into detached words or phrases. But Ned was constantly catching two recurring words—"Sing Lee."

Over and over again were these repeated, till it began to dawn on him that he had heard them before. Then, like a flash, Hugh Chilvers' story came back to him. Sing Lee, the gigantic Chinese miner! Beyond a doubt this must be the man, and the others were his satellites or employees. But why should they have kidnapped the two boys? To this puzzling question, Ned was fain to confess there was no answer so far as he was concerned.

His attention was presently drawn to the papers which the big Chinaman had now spread out on the deck. About them the whole storm of the argument appeared to center. Suddenly

Ned recognized that they were the plans and specifications which Dr. Duncan had given him to deliver to the real estate agent.

"What possible interest can they have for that bunch of Chinks?" thought Ned disgustedly when Tom nudged him.

"Say, they think that those papers are the map to the lost mine!" he exclaimed with a broad grin.

"By cracky! I believe you are right, Tom," gasped out Ned, a great light breaking before him, "and they kidnapped us in that belief! But," he paused, and a puzzled look crept over his face, "how in the world did they know that we had them?"

"Why, it's plain as print."

Ned shook his head.

"I don't see yet," he said.

"Well, look here then," whispered Tom bending his head low. "It's clear that it didn't take them long to find out how Uncle Hugh had

fooled them. They knew that the map must be some place 'round the doctor's house; at least, they thought so. How they knew that Uncle Hugh was there is beyond me. But anyhow, they set a watch on the place—don't you remember that I thought I saw some one watching us from among those Cherokee roses last night?"

"Yes; I thought you must be mistaken. But now——"

"I guess you think I was right?"

"I sure do. But go on, Tom."

"Very well then. Whoever was watching saw the doctor hand you those papers and give you some instructions. They assumed—mind, I'm assuming all this, too—that those papers were Uncle Hugh's, and that for some reason they were being smuggled out of the house. All right then. The watcher hurries back along the road he knows we must take, and they lie in wait for us. In order to make sure we'll stop they strew

broken glass in the road to puncture our tires. Then they sit down and wait."

"But suppose we had come some other way?"

"In that case they'd have watched for another chance. They are a very patient people."

"Then you think that we are merely being kept prisoners because——"

"They are scared to let us go. They are like the chap that caught the wildcat. But I'd give a whole lot to know what they are making out of those plans."

"Let's take another look."

Once more the boys peered out from their observation place. This time they were to see that Sing Lee had at last realized the fact that he had, to use a slangy but forceful expression, been "barking up the wrong tree."

They saw him rise to his feet from his squatting position in the midst of the group and fling the papers overboard wtih a most disgusted expression.

"Ha! ha! that's the time we fooled you, old boy," grinned Tom delightedly. "I fancy our old college chum is in no very good humor right now. The first time he got a lot of brass filings, and now, in the place of the map, he obtains possession of a lot of perfectly good plans and specifications."

"But what's to become of us, Tom? That's the question," demanded Ned, who had a faculty of going straight to the point of any problem.

"I think that now is the time that they will select for visiting our prison and trying to find out what we know about the matter," rejoined Tom.

"In that case let's get back and pretend we never left it."

"What I was going to propose. Come on."

Crouching, they turned preparatory to retracing their steps through the bowels of the junk. But as they started to descend the hatchway by

which they had ascended to the deck a sudden sound brought them to an abrupt standstill.

Below them sounded footsteps and voices.

The way back was "no thoroughfare."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHOSE MOVE NEXT?

It was a juncture where only quick thinking could solve the problem that confronted them. Already the footsteps they had heard below could be made out as ascending the ladder. Caught fairly between two fires, the boys hesitated. Then they gazed about them, trying with desperate resolution to conceive some way out of their difficulty.

Standing erect as they now were, they could see over the bulwarks. The junk lay at anchor, as Ned had surmised. Not more than a hundred yards off, across a muddy creek, lay a collection of huts and tumble-down shacks. Above them towered a wooded slope, on the summit of which was a more or less ruinous mission building of the familiar type, a few bells still hanging in the

square adobe towers. Though they did not recognize the place, our readers know that the junk lay in the creek off the fisher village of San Pedro, already viewed from a distance by friends of the Motor Cycle Chums.

Ned gave a quick glance around. Already the Chinese on the after deck had spied them and set up a shout. For one instant sheer astonishment held their captors rooted to the spot. They had had no idea that the boys would emerge from the influence of the drug so quickly. The sight of the two lads they had confidently supposed were lying insensible below temporarily dumfounded them.

Ned saw this, and at the same instant realized that, if they were to act at all, they must act on the instant. Already the tall Chinaman was starting forward with a cry of rage. Through the hatchway behind them appeared a shaven poll with a pigtail hanging from it. Tom snatched up the billet of wood that Ned had

dropped. With it he dealt the bare skull a crashing blow. There was a grunt and a clatter as the ascending Chinaman dropped, falling unhurt on two of his compatriots who were below him.

Tom's blow had not been a hard one. It was just sufficient to stop the man, for the boy could not bring it upon himself actually to disable the fellow, worthy of such a fate as he might have been.

"Tom, it's our opportunity!"

Ned rapped the words out as the two boys heard the tumult below. From the stern the Chinese were advancing with a vicious rush.

"Go ahead, old fellow, I'm right with you," snapped out Tom breathlessly.

"Then follow me. It's our big chance!"

Ned rushed to the rail and swiftly sized up the height of the dive and the probable depth of the water.

He clambered up while the onrush of Chinese from the stern swept down on them.

"Come on, Tom!"

Ned's voice rang out clear and sharp above the discordant yells and shouts of the Chinese. But Tom hesitated an instant. In his haste he had given his ankle a wrench. The pain was excruciating, but he bravely tried to overcome his momentary faintness. Like an avalanche the Chinese drove on. Sticks and belaying pins began to fly through the air in a shower. They whizzed all about the boys, but luckily the aim of the infuriated men was bad and the lads were not hurt.

Ned, looking behind him, saw Tom bend over his ankle and then, with a white face, straighten up.

"Give me a hand, Ned," he gasped, "I'm all right."

"You're hurt?"

"No; only a twist of the ankle. Help me up on

the rail. I'll be able to swim all right," for Tom had guessed Ned's plan to swim for the shore.

Ned leaped from the rail and supported Tom toward it. He had just helped him up when the tall Chinaman rushed upon them, the others a trifle behind him. Evidently they were somewhat afraid of the two stalwart youths.

There are times when a movement made on the spur of the moment is more successful than one which is premeditated. With this in mind, Ned bent low, and with a yell calculated to alarm the superstitious Chinese, he rushed straight at the tall Chinaman. The fellow flashed a knife in the air, but in the wink of an eyelash Ned had rushed between his legs like a battering ram.

Over toppled the tall Chinee, his arms waving like the sails of a windmill. His balance completely lost, he tottered back, and, catching his feet on the edge of the hatch coaming, he pitched headlong down, landing on the top of the squirming, yelling mass below.

Ned instantly sprang for the rail on which Tom was already poised.

"Now, Tom!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

For one fraction of a second the two lads stood unsupported on the narrow rail.

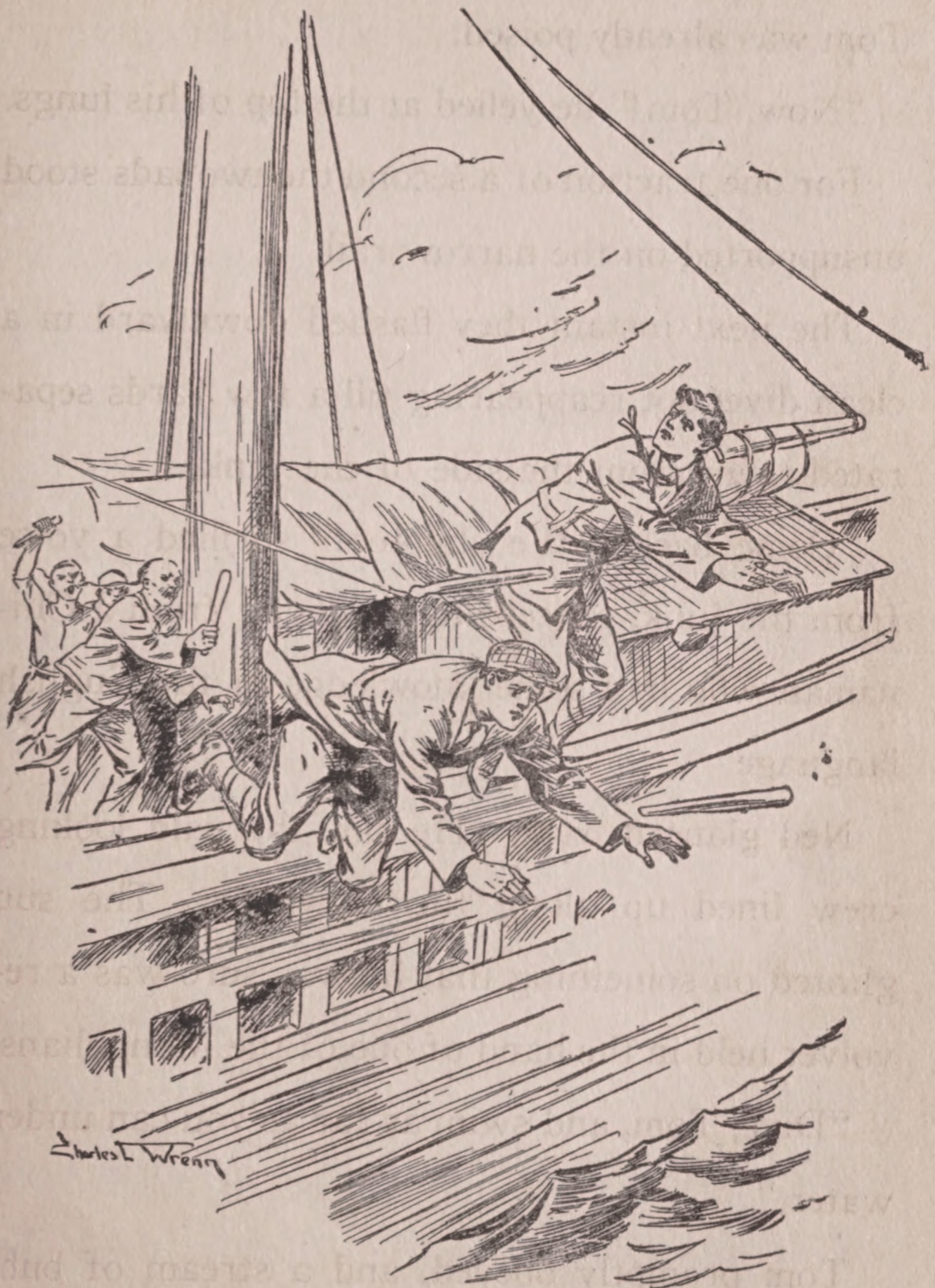
The next instant they flashed downward in a clean dive, not reappearing till a few yards separated them from the side of the junk.

"Come back! We shootee!" shrilled a voice from the junk, proceeding evidently from a Chinaman who had some knowledge of the English language.

Ned glanced back. He saw the wild looking crew lined up along the bulwarks. The sun glinted on something that he was sure was a revolver held in the hand of one of the Mongolians.

"Dive, Tom, and swim as far as you can under water."

Tom promptly obeyed, and a stream of bubbles marked the spot where the two Motor Cycle Chums vanished from the view of the marksman.



THE NEXT INSTANT THEY FLASHED DOWNWARD IN A CLEAN DIVE.—*Page* 130.

A few feet more and they were compelled to come up for breath. The exciting scene which had preceded their dive had badly winded Ned, and Tom's foot hurt painfully.

"Do you think they'll shoot, Ned?" gasped out Tom.

"No; they won't dare to so close to a village—wow!"

There was a spattering of water as a bullet zipped past them, ricocheting along the surface of the water.

A yell went up from the Chinese.

"Crackers! They do mean business, after all! Dive again, Tom, and swim as fast as you can for the land."

Once more the forms of the two swimming boys vanished from view. But they had to come up again shortly. Almost exhausted as they were, their clothes began to feel like suits of armor, their limbs like lead.

"I—I can't keep this up much longer," gasped out Tom, "better go on and leave me, Ned."

"As if I would!" replied Ned indignantly. "No, Tom, you've *got* to make shore, and that's all there is to it. Come on," and Ned struck out once more, keeping close to Tom in case the latter's strength should suddenly give out, as he had every reason to fear it would.

Another bullet zipped past them, but, like the first, it went wide of the mark.

"Look," cried Ned suddenly, "there's a boat putting out from the shore."

"So there is. Three persons are in it. Hurray, we're saved!"

"Not so fast, Tom. Those fellows in the boat are Chinamen!"

"What?"

"They are, I tell you. Great Scott, Tom!" as the truth flashed on him, "we are out of the frying pan into the fire with a vengeance! This

must be the Chinese fishing village of San Pedro."

"If we could gain the shore first, we might escape them yet."

"I doubt it. I'm almost all in, and I guess you are as bad."

"Worse," rejoined poor Tom, panting painfully. His breath came with a whistling sound forced between his clenched teeth.

The boat, manned by the three Chinamen, began to move toward the boys with all swiftness. In a moment it was alongside.

"Dive!" cried Ned, determined to face the situation out to the last ditch.

But in their almost exhausted condition the boys could not stay under for any length of time. As they came up, both were grabbed by the hair. They struggled with every ounce of strength they possessed, but, despite their stout resistance, they were hauled on board. Tom's condition was now serious. The last dive and the struggle fol-

lowing it had almost cost him his life. As he was hauled on board he only realized in a dim, uncertain way what had taken place.

Not so Ned. Almost crazed by this seizure, he struck out furiously. His fist caught one of his captors full on the nose, flattening it even more than nature had already done.

"Ooof!" groaned the Chinaman, and would have fallen overboard had it not been for his comrades, who caught him.

Ned took advantage of this to seize an oar. He waved it round his head menacingly and dared his captors to "come on," regardless of the fact that they could not know what he was saying. But if they did not understand the words, they were not slow to catch the meaning of them. The sight of this dauntless young American boy, his face and eyes aflame, brandishing the heavy oar with a right good will, struck fear into their hearts. They crouched, jabbering, at the stern of the boat.

Following up his advantage, Ned advanced. It was a fatal move. His foot caught in a thwart and down he came, headlong, sprawling his length on the bottom of the boat.

With a cry of triumph the Chinese rushed forward. In a trice they had both Ned and Tom tied hand and foot, as powerless to move as two bundles.

This done, they rowed toward the junk in answer to a loud hail from her decks. As they came alongside, the tall Chinaman and two others descended the side by a rough rope ladder. Ned, who could see about him, noted with some satisfaction a large plum-colored bruise above the tall Chinaman's eye. It was a beautiful "pigeon's egg," sustained when he tumbled into the hold on the top of his struggling fellow countrymen.

"That was one for you anyhow, old socks," grinned Ned to himself, with much inward satisfaction.

The tall Chinaman scowled at him, but vouch-

safed no remarks. He uttered a few rapid orders in Chinese, and the boat began to move toward the shore.

"I wonder what the next move is going to be," mused Ned. "At any rate, I'm afraid it won't be ours. We've had that and lost."

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE OLD BELL TOWER.

It was twilight. In a small room with rough plaster walls, lighted only by a small, high window, two boys sat disconsolately discussing the situation in which they found themselves. The remains of a meal which had consisted of stew, served with rice, bread and water, lay on the tiled floor. Furnishings there were none.

The door of this place was of stout oak held, as the boys well knew, by a heavy bar of iron on the outside. Of course the reader has recognized the prisoners as the Motor Cycle Chums, but the place of their imprisonment he is less liable to have surmised. They were under bolt and bar in one of the bell towers of the old San Pedro mission, a hundred feet or more above the ground,—locked in a chamber—once a

monkish cell—from which egress, except by supernatural means, appeared impossible.

What had brought them there is soon told. Bound and trussed, they had been landed from the boat and thrust into a rude hut. Here the tall Chinaman visited them and put to them a multiplicity of questions concerning Hugh Chilvers and his lost mine. He frankly confessed he had made a mistake in ordering the capture of the two boys, but nevertheless, he said, after the trouble they had caused he was going to keep them prisoners till he had decided what to do with them.

Moreover he asserted, in his very fair English, that he was certain that they knew at least something of the mine and the whereabouts of the map. Both boys stoutly denied this, and begged to be set free, but Sing Lee was firm. Finally they were carried to the bell tower and locked into this chamber, which apparently had been used as a prison before, to judge by the iron

bars and bolts on the outside of the door. The window was not barred, presumably on account of the tower being at such a height from the ground that escape would be impossible by that route.

To explain further why the boys had reason to believe that the chamber in which they were confined had been used as a prison before, they had, in the first place, noticed, driven into the wall, a stout iron ring. From this ring depended a chain and handcuffs of antique type. In the second place, they had heard rumors that the Chinese on the isolated island made their own laws, held their own courts and punished their offenders in their own way. The authorities did not interfere with them because they did not deem it worth while to meddle with a colony that kept strictly to itself, not to mention the difficulty of reaching the lonely place.

The outlook was gloomy enough. True, they were not tied, their lashings having been cut.

On the whole, they had to admit, they had not been treated inhumanly and, had they been able to know the outcome of their confinement, they might have regarded it in the light of an exciting adventure. But it was the thought of their friends' worry and the uncertainty that beset them, that made their situation so aggravating. They guessed that, ultimately, the Chinese would have to set them free; but then, on the other hand, they had learned a good deal of the secrets of San Pedro, and they might not be liberated till it suited the yellow men to do so without peril to themselves.

One thing was plain enough to them now. Sing Lee and his companions, in their persistent search for the map, had enlisted the good offices of their compatriots. As the boys knew, all Chinese belong to one of Six Companies—powerful secret organizations, the members of which are pledged to aid each other, no matter what the occasion. That members of Sing Lee's

tong, or company, had given him the use of the junk and its crew in his nefarious enterprise neither lad found room to doubt.

Twilight deepened into dusk and dusk into darkness while the boys sat discussing their plight. At last they sank into an uneasy sort of sleep, disturbed by weird dreams. These were probably due to the last effects of the Chinese drug.

What time it might have been Tom had no idea, when he was awakened by the sound of a Chinese banjo below. On it was being played a tune which agreed with the Chinese rules of harmony, starting with a grunt and ending in a high pitched squeak. The performance, judged by Western standards, was a shade below a cats' concert, but to Tom's ears just then it sounded like the sweetest harmony.

"Tump! tampa-tampa! tump!" went the banjo.

"Oh-h-h! E-yi-ee-oo! Oh-e-yi-e-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!" went the voice over and over again.

Tom shook Ned's shoulder violently.

"Ned! wake up!" he whispered. "Hark, do you hear that tune?"

"Yes, some Chink exercising his lungs or serenading his lady love," drawled Ned sleepily.

"Lady love nothing! It's *us* he's singing to!"

"Tell him to shut up then."

"Don't you recognize that tune? Say, don't you?"

"Why, there *is* something familiar about it. Let's see, it's— it's——"

"Wing Lung!"

"Crackers! So it is. I remember now we used to throw boots at him in camp to make him stop caterwauling. But how in the world did he get here, if it *is* he?"

"It's him," confidently asserted the ungrammatical Tom. "Tell you what, Ned, give me a boost up on your shoulders. I can reach the window that way and look out. It's bright moonlight and I can see whoever is below."

Ned, broad awake now, scrambled to his feet.

"All right, Tom," he said, leaning against the wall, "climb up!"

Tom, whose ankle still pained him, manfully scrambled up on Ned's shoulders and thence chinned up to the window. Below him lay a small clearing surrounded by brush and flooded with moonlight. At the foot of the tower, like a forlorn lover in an old ballad, stood Wing Lung, his yellow face turned upward, strumming away like mad at his old Chinee banjo.

"Hullo, Wing!" hailed Tom softly.

A joyous exclamation went up from Wing.

"Hullo, Massel Tom! You one piecee allee litee?"

"Yes, we're all right, except that we'd rather be outside this place. Stop that racket a minute, will you?"

"Allee litee. Me sing wakee you, so be. Me velly cleveh Chinee, sing, play eblything."

"Never mind that now. How did you get here?"

"Me tell you bymby. Listen, you want getee out?"

"Do we want to get out? What a question!"

"Allee litee, me fixee him. See this ball stling? Me throw to you, you catch um. Let end down. Me fixee lope. You climb down one piecee quick. Sabee?"

"I sabe fast enough," rejoined Tom delightedly. "I'll make the rope fast to a big hook that's in the room here. But have you plenty of rope?"

"Me swipee plenty lot from village. Allee men sleepee. They thinkee you lock up tight. All samee county jail."

"Well, they'll find out their mistake before long. Fire away with that string, Wing."

It took several efforts before Tom caught the ball of twine, but at last he grasped it. This done, he let down one end and was soon hauling up a good stout rope. Pulling the end of this

TOM WENT FIRST AND REACHED THE GROUND IN SAFETY.
—*Page* 145.

in, he and Ned, the latter of course having been told all that was going on, made one end fast to the great ring in the wall. This done, all was ready for the descent.

Tom went first and reached the ground in safety. In fact, to an athletic lad like him it was not much of a trick to slide down a strong rope. Nor did the thought of the descent bother Ned at all. He was preparing to follow Tom when there came a sound outside the door that made his heart stand still.

Some one was ascending the stairs! Under the door Ned could catch the gleam of the lantern that was carried. For an instant he hesitated, and then clambering up the rope like a squirrel he reached the window, climbed through it and slid to the ground like the trained athlete he was.

Hardly had his feet touched the ground, when from the tower window a light gleamed and a quick, startled voice sounded.

Their escape had been discovered!

An instant later one of the long disused bells began to clang out on the night. It was a tocsin to rouse the fishing village from its slumbers. They had only a few minutes' grace and then the island would be alive with searching Chinese.

It was curious that in their quandary both boys looked at the "cleveh Chinee." Never had his face seemed more unperturbed, more like a carved ivory mask, than at that critical instant.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOME AGAIN.

"What in the world will we do now, Wing?"

Ned asked the question as, above the clanging of the bell, they could hear shouts and yells from the aroused village below.

"You come follow me. Plentee quick. This way allee litee."

Wing darted off into the brush, following a narrow trail. The boys stumbled after him. Behind them they could hear the uproar of the crowd who were ascending the hill and surging about the old mission. Wing stopped in a moonlit patch of the trail and listened. A distinct grin crept over his features.

"They allee samee plenty mad," he said, "do them lot of good. We one piecee fixee them allee samee—so be."

Signing to the boys to follow him, he started once more down the narrow trail, this time at a swift trot. The boys had much ado to keep up with him. At length they emerged at the side of a creek. A boat lay there, a rough, leaky affair of boards, carelessly put together. Wing signed to it and they got in, Ned taking up the oars. Wing nodded to him approvingly.

"Pullee that way," he said pointing, and Ned fell to the oars with a will.

High upon the hill, lights flashed and shouts and cries resounded.

Presently, as they drew around a bend in the creek, the concentrated nature of the sounds ceased. Lights began to scatter here and there, and some of them could be seen headed toward the water.

"Him bad," grunted Wing seeing this.

"Why, we are clear away from the island," protested Tom.

"Yes, but cleek wind and wind allee samee

macaloni. We be go by island again plitty soon."

Sure enough, the creek, bending and doubling like a snake among the marshes, brought them right opposite to the village itself before very long. Tom breathed hard as he saw that several Chinamen were putting off in boats. Evidently it had been guessed that they had made their escape by water.

For a time it looked as if the boats must head them off, but they slipped by in the darkness. As soon as, under Wing's guidance, Ned turned the boat into a narrow branch creek, the Chinee called on him to stop for a minute. Getting out of the boat, he produced a bit of rope. He tied one end of this to an old stake on one side of the creek mouth. A dismantled landing served as a place to make it fast on the other.

"Now then, let them comee all they plenty much likee," he said after he had completed the job to his satisfaction. "Honorable rope plentee

much catchum allee boats. Long time 'fore they findee out what hit them—so be."

"That is a clever idea, Wing," delightedly declared Tom.

"Oh, me velly, velly cleveh Chinee," beamed Wing, his slant eyes dancing mischievously at the mental picture he formed of the pursuing boats bumping into the rope barrier.

As swiftly as Ned's powerful strokes would propel her, the boat was rushed along the creek. It was a narrow way, almost too narrow to use the oars. On each side steep banks towered so that they could see nothing but a strip of night sky far above them. Luckily, the moon gave plenty of light.

Wing told his story as they hastened along. Taking it up where he left Nat and Al to ride off for provisions, we will follow it. Briefly then, Wing had come to the village pretending that he was a Chinaman who had been "fired" from a ranch and wanted a job as fisherman. At

first received suspiciously, he was at last taken into the confidence of his fellow countrymen. He was just fitted out with a job on one of the bigger junks, in fact, when he saw the boys carried to the tower. He made his way back to Nat and Al, and told them to "camp out" till he came back and informed them that he hoped to accomplish the rescue of the boys.

This done he made his way back to the village and, watching his chance, stole some twine and rope, and, when opportunity offered, made his way to the tower. First however, this conscienceless Chinee had stolen a boat and placed it at the foot of the trail leading to the old mission. How well his plan succeeded we already know.

It was an hour after they left the old mission that the reunited lads were all shaking hands and congratulating each other, at the isolated place on the edge of the salt meadows where Nat and Al were waiting. That Wing came in for

the lion's share of the praise goes without saying. Had it not been for the resourcefulness of the "cleveh Chinee," it might have been days before the boys escaped, or were set free. In fact, so far as their discovery was concerned, they might have been removed and hidden in case of a raid by the authorities. Wing told them that while on the island he had heard that the old mission was undermined with secret passages and exits, through any of which it would have been an easy matter to smuggle the two prisoners in case of a visit from white men.

But not much time was spent in talking over the affair. All felt that details could wait. Ned and Tom mounted behind Nat and Al, and Wing rode ahead on his machine. Dr. Duncan, seriously worried over the mysterious absence of his young friends, was the first to greet the Motor Cycle Chums as they came chugging up to his place. How warmly he welcomed them may be imagined. It was late at night before

their stories were told, narratives to which Hugh Chilvers, now able to sit up, listened with rapt attention. Of course, in the meantime, the 'phone had been in requisition and everybody concerned notified that the missing lads had been found.

"How I wish that I could have lads like you along when I go out on the gold trail once more!" exclaimed Hugh Chilvers when Ned wound up his story.

"They'd be a great aid to us, Chilvers," agreed Dr. Duncan.

"Us?" asked Ned, noticing the plural the doctor used.

"Yes; I guess I've got the gold fever once more," laughed the famous geologist. "I've a little money I don't know what to do with, and I've agreed to go into this Lost Mine business with friend Chilvers here. It looks like a good investment. Anyhow, I need a change, and the adventurous part of it will do me good. And if

we don't get gold and found a new El Dorado, we shall have had the good fortune to explore some most interesting prehistoric works, and I do not know but that, to me, will be as interesting as the discovery of virgin gold."

Ned and Tom exchanged glances. Then they looked up at Nat and Al. The doctor regarded them all quizzically.

"Thinking you'd like to come along, eh, boys?" he said.

"Well—er——" began Tom and stopped.

"You see——" stammered Nat.

"We were dying to take a long trip on our motor cycles," stuck in Ned, "and maybe——"

"We could be useful," supplemented Tom boldly.

"Well, well, we'll see," quoth the doctor encouragingly, "but just now the order of the day is bed. To-morrow is another day."

As they undressed in the big room in which

they all four were put up for the night, the boys conversed in low, excited tones.

"I guess my dad would let me go," hazarded Ned. "It wouldn't be half as dangerous as the Northwest."

The others agreed that a trip to the Lost Mine could be as safe as riding on the New York subway. But this was said for "external use only," as the liniments have it. Each boy, in his heart of hearts, was dreaming of the excitement of the open desert, the fascination and mystery of the Lost Mine, the lure of the search for gold.

"Say, boys," mumbled Tom sleepily, as he sank off into slumber, "I'm going to dream of the trail."

"The gold trail," added Ned poetically, as he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GOLD TRAIL.

The dull gray light that heralds the coming of dawn over the vast and dreary stretches of the great Nevada desert became streaked with flushes of rose color. Gradually these grew brighter till the eastern sky glowed vermilion and scarlet. The firmament blazed like the mouth of a blast furnace. Then the sun, a copper hued ball, topped the ragged edge of a range of desolate, barren hills, and it was day.

As the light spread, every detail of the scene was brought into relief. To the east, vast stretches of glittering white alkali flats, dreary, monotonous and suggestive of sinister things, were revealed. Far off lay the desert range, above which the sun was now swimming, but for the rest it was one great sea of alkali.

To the westward were more hills, bare, treeless and devoid of all semblance of life. They looked like the mountains we see in imaginary pictures of the moon. They might have been the outcroppings of a dead continent. In the broken ground at the foot of these western hills appeared scores of small arroyos and gullies. They seamed the gray desert as wrinkles line and criss-cross an old man's face.

From one of these arroyos, as the sun grew higher, a thin column of smoke ascended like a gray ghost. From the same spot came the rattle of pots and pans and the sound of voices and laughter. The encampment from which these sounds of life proceeded was an odd one, considering the surroundings. Insensibly one associates the desert with wiry bronchos, hard-as-iron cowboys, horse hunters or wandering Indians.

In this encampment, however, none of these figured. Instead, there were three neat tents of

waterproof silk, light green in color, a collapsible table spread with tinware ready for breakfast, and stools set around it. Above the cooking fire, composed of sage brush roots, a Chinaman was busy stirring a big pot of oatmeal. Bacon crisped in a spider. The pleasant aroma of coffee filled the morning air, which was still cool; for, blindingly hot as are days on the desert, the nights are invariably cool and pleasant.

But, astonishing as was all this in a desert camp, there were still more surprising things about it; that is, from a plainsman's point of view. Off to one side stood a singular looking, black automobile, capable of seating two. Its big engine hood showed that it was equipped beneath its "bonnet" with engines of high power. Leaning against the auto were five motor cycles. Four of them were natty and up to date, although dusty from the desert. The fifth, a single cylindered machine, showed signs of hard usage.

From its handle bars hung a tiny figure of a Chinese god or joss.

From one of the tents there presently emerged four sun-burned, well-knit lads. All wore uniforms of khaki of very light weight, big pith sun helmets, black leggins and boots. On the breast of each was pinned some sort of scarlet emblem. A closer inspection would have shown this to be a tiny enameled figure of a motor cyclist inclosed in a filigree border. Each bore the words: *"The Riding Rovers' Club."* From each motor cycle, too, which we did not notice before, there depended a scarlet silk pennant bearing the same legend.

Hardly had the four boys emerged and begun skylarking about, when from the other two tents there appeared an elderly, soldierly-looking man, wearing sun spectacles and a white linen suit, and a stalwart, powerful individual with a nut-brown beard who wore the garb of a miner. The latter's costume consisted of a rough blue shirt,

sombrero, red handkerchief, dungaree trousers and boots.

Of course our readers will have guessed that the boys are Ned Winton and Tom Chase and their chums, Nat Nichols and Al Anderson. The two men are Dr. Duncan and Tom's uncle,—long since restored to rugged health,—Hugh Chilvers. How do they come to be out on the desert "a hundred miles from any place," as Tom puts it?

While the boys are scampering off with tin basins to get a wash at a "water-hole" a short way down the arroyo, we will retrace our steps a little and explain how it happens that our party is so far from Dr. Duncan's comfortable ranch house, where we last saw them sinking off to roseate dreams of the gold trail.

Dr. Duncan proved as good as his hints. He and Mr. Chilvers needed reliable help on their adventurous trip, but at the same time they did not exactly know of anyone with whom they cared to trust their momentous secret. The boys,

all sturdy young chaps, appealed to them as being just the right sort of material for such an expedition. But winning over the lads' parents was a different proposition.

Ned's father and mother did not offer much opposition. In fact, Mr. Winton, who, as we know, was a manufacturer of mining machinery, readily took a third share in the venture and appointed Ned, laughingly, as his "superintendent on the spot, to see that he didn't get skinned." Incidentally, a consignment of mining machinery had been sent from the factory in the east to await their call at Silver Bow on the Nevada and South East Utah R. R., the nearest station to the Lost Mine of the Bitter Creek desert.

Mrs. Chase, however, had to return west, meet her long missing brother, and discuss matters with him before she would consent to Tom's going along. But, at last, after many tears and much persuasion, she reluctantly gave way. Little Andy's parents wouldn't hear of his going,

and Joe Shortridge's father needed him at home. We regret to say that neither of these parental edicts was received without considerable rebellion. Nat and Al, after a hard fight, won their points and, bright with hope, the party had set out from San Benito a week before.

Few knew of their real destination; but half the town was there to bid them "God-speed" on what it was supposed was a hunting trip. Andy and Joe, almost in tears, watched the train pull out, and the boys felt real regret at leaving them behind. But it was not in boy nature to feel depressed long, with the exciting thoughts of all that lay in front of them claiming first place.

In San Francisco Mr. Chilvers obtained his map from his engineer friend, and without loss of time they made some purchases of modern rifles and so on, for the dash across the alkali. Dr. Duncan had ordered, on plans suggested by 'Hugh Chilvers, an unique type of auto for desert travel. It had the chassis of a touring car and

was of sixty horse power. Its tires were solid and unusually wide, to avoid sinking into the sand, for, besides its own weight and that of its two passengers, the car was designed to carry three days' supply of water and a big reserve fund of gasolene. It was for this reason that the touring part of the car had been stripped off, and only two small seats left. The remainder of the car was converted into a baggage wagon, carrying the supplies, with the exception of the outfit that each of the motor cycle boys carried on his machine. That outfit included emergency rations, toilet articles, a few changes of garments, socks and underclothes, and a portable tent, as well as their "first aid" kits and tools.

The auto and the motor cycles had been loaded on the train at 'Frisco and when Silver Bow was reached the machines had needed only a few adjustments to be ready for instant travel. In advance of the party, a large reserve supply of gasolene had been shipped in iron drums to Silver

Bow, and they expected from time to time to call for it as it was needed. The appearance of the company was a mystery to Silver Bow; but it was given out that they were a party of eastern capitalists seeking oil, and so ridicule, instead of suspicion of their real object, greeted the travelers, which was just what they wanted.

If an inkling of their real plans had leaked out, it would have been fatal to the secrecy with which they desired to work till everything was ready to declare to the world the opening of a new gold field, an unworked El Dorado. From which it will be seen that Dr. Duncan and his partners were not selfish enough to wish to keep their discovery wholly to themselves. If the find proved as rich as they confidently expected, they would be content to stake out claims for themselves and then let the mining world share the wondrous goldfields.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THERE'S NO WATER."

Breakfast was a merry meal. This wild, free life along the trail suited the boys down to the ground. Their elders, too, enjoyed it. To Dr. Duncan it was like obtaining a new lease of life to be once more back in the environment amid which he had made many of his geological studies. Hugh Chilvers, on the other hand, was possessed of the true pioneer spirit, the spirit that lived and moved in the old pathfinders, Fremont, Clarke and Daniel Boone.

The boys were getting their machines in readiness for a fresh start and Wing Lung was carefully packing the washed-up dishes, when Dr. Duncan called Hugh Chilvers aside for a consultation.

"How far is it to the next water hole?" he asked.

"Oh, a matter of sixty miles or so. We ought to make it by noon, or soon thereafter."

"I'm glad of that. The water in the tank is running rather low. Of course we can refill here, but we want to take no chances."

Chilvers nodded.

"No, we'd better fill up," he agreed, "desert water holes are treacherous things. Once in a while they have a nasty habit of going dry from no apparent cause."

The boys were summoned and the situation explained to them. Soon they were busy with folding canvas buckets, filling up the big water tank of the auto. It may as well be said here that the water obtained from the hole was not of any sparkling, crystal clear variety. It was muddy, discolored and strongly alkaline; but travelers on the desert must get used to such things. Not that the boys minded hardships of

any kind. The novelty of the trip, the complete change from anything they had known hitherto, appealed to them in a way that made minor troubles mere incidents of their journey.

The tank was soon filled and, after everything had been packed compactly away, all was in readiness for a fresh start. It was their second day on the desert, and the first time that they had had an opportunity to view the lonely alkaline-encrusted wastes from any height. Before starting they looked back over the desolate path they had traveled. Much more of the same sort of traveling lay before them. Yet, despite its loneliness, the desert possessed a certain fascination for them.

Hugh Chilvers walked up to where they stood beside their motor cycles, gazing back at the desert.

"Well, what do you think of the Big Alkali, boys?" he inquired of them.

"It's rather early to say yet," responded Ned, "but—but we like it, don't we, boys?"

"You bet we do," came the enthusiastic response in chorus.

Nat Nichols added sententiously:

"Horntoads and haversacks, yes—it's great."

Chilvers looked about him at the glittering waste and at the ragged hills devoid of moisture or of vegetation.

"So far you have only seen the desert in its fairest mood," he said. "It can be far different from this. Yet, in spite of all, men come back to it and risk their lives, lured on by the call of the gold."

His tone held a reminiscent note. Perhaps he was thinking of his partner, the man who had shown him the path to the lost mine, and whose bones lay out somewhere on the untraveled expanses that lay beyond them. He might have said more, but the doctor called to him impatiently:

"Come, Chilvers! We're ready."

The miner hastened back to the auto, which was already chugging and trembling as if impatient to be off without further delay. Around his neck Nat Nichols wore, slung by a cord, a bugle. He now placed it to his lips and blew a lilting call. It was the signal for the start.

Like one machine, the motor cycles started their whirring, explosive song, Wing Lung's battered "pop-pop bikee" making a noise like an automatic shot gun in full blast. They flung themselves into the saddles, after two hops and a jump, and off across the desert the cortège proceeded, the motor cycles in advance, spinning along the rough trail. For they had not yet reached the point where they left the trail and struck into the pathless wastes that lay beyond.

Hour after hour, while the sun climbed higher in the sky, they held their way. Dust rose in clouds about them, painting the travelers and their machines a uniform, dull tint of gray. Fol-

lowing the cowboy fashion, the boys wore handkerchiefs across their mouths in order to prevent, as far as possible, any breathing in of the alkaline dust. But, even with this protection, the acrid, stinging powder penetrated their nostrils and made them smart sharply.

The heat grew as the sun followed his track. At noon, when he hung in the zenith, the rays beat down like the breath from a newly opened oven door. But still, from the auto behind them, came no signal to stop. From time to time, Hugh Chilvers stood up in the auto and swept the horizon with a pair of binoculars.

He was searching for the water hole.

A naked post, planted long years since, should have marked the place where it was located and acted as a signal of hope to wandering prospectors; but as yet the miner had failed to see any trace of it. At length a halt was called. It was necessary to stop and allow the cylinders of the auto, which was an air-cooled machine, to

cool off. Under the blazing sun, and at the steady pace that had been maintained, they had begun to heat up badly. The boys also were experiencing some trouble with their motor cycles. It was not only the heat from above, but the blistering warmth that radiated from the surface of the desert that caused the overheating of the cylinders.

"Phew! me for a drink," exclaimed Ned, jumping off the Red Streak as he brought it to a halt, "I feel as if I'd been eating dust for a year."

"Same here," agreed Tom, "I've perspired so much that I'm as dry as an old bone."

"Plentee muchee warm," assented Wing Lung, bringing his coughing and spluttering "Lattelsnake" to a halt.

As for Nat and Al, they merely panted.

"Dippers and dining cars, I could drink a pint of hot vinegar," declared Nat, when he caught his breath.

They all headed for the water tank with Ned

and Tom in the lead. The former was opening his collapsible drinking cup as he ran. Dr. Duncan and Hugh Chilvers were busy examining the overheated engine when they heard a sudden cry from Ned.

"What's the matter?" cried Dr. Duncan anxiously, for Ned's exclamation had been one of dismay.

"Matter! There's no water!"

"No water?"

"That's right. The spigot has jolted open and all but about a quart has run out along the road."

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ODD CHARACTER.

There are few things that strike more closely to the heart of the desert traveler than the notification that the water supply has given out. Upon water he literally depends for his life. Without it, death is only a matter of hours, unless Providence intervenes.

Small wonder was it then that the party exchanged dismayed glances as they stood by the tank. Ned had shut the spigot off, thereby conserving a few cupfuls of the precious fluid, but the leaky spigot had accomplished all the evil it could. To close it now was much like locking the stable door after the horse has been stolen.

The boys were all for satisfying their thirst with what little water remained. But Dr. Duncan vetoed it at once.

"Don't touch a drop till we prospect for that water hole which ought to be somewhere close at hand," he said, authoritatively. "Chilvers, surely we can't be far from it?"

"We should be able to sight it from here," returned the other. "I cannot understand it."

He took out his compass and regarded it attentively. Then he looked up at the sun and at his watch, making a mental calculation; for desert adventurers are like sailors in this, that they travel largely by the aid of the compass, map, sun and stars. Only they have frequently to cross uncharted stretches of country, whereas practically every knot of the ocean is charted and classified.

"I've made no mistake," he declared after an interval, "or, if I have, only a very slight one."

"But why can't we see that pole which marks it?"

The question came from Dr. Duncan.

"That I am unable to say. I have a suggestion

to offer, however. Let the young men scatter and see if they can locate it within a radius, say, of two miles from this spot."

"That sounds like a good idea," assented Dr. Duncan, "but is there no danger of their getting lost?"

"Not the least. That is, I hardly think so. But, to make assurance doubly sure, let them each take a revolver or a rifle, and in case of trouble they can fire three shots. These can be repeated at intervals to guide a rescuing party in case of need."

The boys were all keen for this bit of water prospecting, and almost forgot their burning thirst in their anxiety to be off on an independent search.

Ned and Tom were assigned to go east while the other two lads' route lay to the west. They were to travel in semi-circles, converging toward the north, in which direction Wing Lung was dispatched.

A few minutes after receiving the orders, the motor cycles whizzed out of camp, off over the desert. While the desert looks as flat as a board, it is by no means as level as it appears. In fact, like the sea, to which it has already been compared, it is full of waves and ridges. Thus it was that the boys had only gone a short distance from the auto when they vanished from sight.

"This doesn't look very cheerful, Ned," observed Tom, as they sped along over the hard ground, skirting a straggling sage bush every now and then.

"No, but we've got to look on the bright side of it, Tom," was the rejoinder. "No use getting downcast till we know that we are up against it really."

"I suppose not; but oh! what wouldn't I give for an ice cream soda right now! Think of the cool fizz of the fountain, and the clink of the ice, and the——"

"Tom Chase, if you don't shut up, I'll get off

and give you a licking," cried Ned, his voice hoarse from his dry throat and parched palate.

"Come on and try it," cried Tom and speeded off on the Blue Bird, taking rises and vanishing into coulees for all the world like a boat skimming over the waves.

Ned was not far behind him. The two machines fairly spun along. But the boys' eyes were wide open all the time, gazing on every side of them for some sign of the water-hole. It should have been marked by a tall pole, as they knew, but so far no such thing was in sight.

Suddenly topping a rise, they saw before them, rising from the next hollow, a column of smoke.

"Gracious! There's someone down in there!" exclaimed Ned, in a half startled tone.

Somehow it had never occurred to him that anyone else but themselves could be abroad on the desert. It felt almost disconcerting thus suddenly to come upon traces of a fellow being.

Tom slowed down. Rather an alarmed look came into his face.

"Suppose it's Indians!" he gasped out.

"Indians! Nonsense! What would Indians be doing out here? It's prospectors, more likely."

"Anyhow, whoever or whatever they are, they can tell us where to get water, as like as not," decided Tom.

The boys applied power once more and the motor cycles climbed the ridge. They found themselves looking down on a rather remarkable scene.

By a fire made of sage brush roots, which grew plentifully in the interstices of the desert hills, sat an old man with a huge gray beard which, matted and unkempt, reached almost to his waist. His clothes were filthy in the extreme, and on his long, uncombed mop of gray hair he wore a scare-crow hat.

A horse, as shaggy and wretched-looking as himself, was cropping at the sage brush, hav-

ing disposed of some grain which had been cast on the ground before it. A battered saddle was on the horse's back and across the crupper were slung, one on either side, capacious bags. By the old man lay a rifle, a long-barreled, formidable-looking affair.

But what caused the boys as much excitement as anything that they had beheld since setting out was that the old man sat on the bank of a muddy hole, in the bottom of which there was the gleam of water. By the side of the hole lay what had once been a tall pole, but which the old man had apparently cut down and used for firewood, for an axe lay beside it.

Ned flushed with indignation as he saw this. No doubt but that this was the water hole for which they had been searching, and the old man had selfishly cut down for his own use the tall pole that had been set there as a guide to the place. Both lads knew, from Tom's uncle, enough of the desert code to know that such

an act was a gross infraction of the desert laws. Without that tall pole to guide them, adventurers might have passed by the water hole altogether. A lone prospector, unable to cover the ground as they could, would have perished miserably, imagining that he was out of his path.

As they stopped their machines on the brink of the hollow and gazed down into it, the old man became aware of their presence. He turned on them a pair of watery, red-rimmed eyes which lit up with a fierce gleam as they encountered the two boys. What with his leathery, dirty skin and disreputable appearance generally, the old man reminded the boys of nothing so much as some huge ape or baboon.

Jibbering incoherently, the old man leaped to his feet and seizing his rifle, leveled it at the boys.

At first they could hardly believe their eyes. It was incredible that out on the lonely desert they should have met with anything but friendli-

ness from a fellow wanderer. Yet there was no mistaking the baleful gleam in the old man's eyes. They seemed to sparkle like live coals in their red frames as he waved and gesticulated.

"Go 'way!" he screamed, dancing about like an angry child. "Away! away! I'll shoot! I'll kill! Away! away! away!"

He aimed the rifle full at Ned and squinted wickedly along the barrel. Ned pulled Tom down behind the rise of the little hill. It was lucky he did so, for at the same instant a bullet came whistling and shrieking above their heads.

"Well, what do you know about that?" gasped out Tom, his face pale at their narrow escape, for there was no room to doubt that the old man had shot point blank at them.

CHAPTER XX.

WHO ALSO PROVES DANGEROUS.

The boys lost no time in getting back to the camp, as the spot where the auto had been left may be called. Their experience had amazed and unnerved them. They were entirely at a loss to understand it.

Retracing their way quickly enough by following the tracks their wheels had made as they came away, they were not long in finding the place where they had left Dr. Duncan and Tom's uncle.

Both looked up with questioning glances as the boys made their appearance.

"Well?" asked Dr. Duncan as they alighted from their machines.

"Well," rejoined Ned with a half smile, "we found water all right enough——"

"Good. I knew the hole was somewhere hereabouts. You can guide us to it," exclaimed Tom's uncle.

"Um—er, I'm afraid a few preliminaries will have to be gone through first," said Ned hesitatingly.

"Why? What's the trouble? Have to dig it out? That's soon done."

"No, not that exactly. But there's a tenant in possession and he refuses to vacate. Backs up his refusal with a bullet, in fact."

Genuine amazement showed on the faces of both men. Ned, seeing this, hastened to explain.

"Jove," exclaimed Mr. Chilvers when he had finished, "a nester, eh? Those old cranks are not so uncommon as you might think. They squat by a water hole and then take toll of all that come along. On the Sesape trail in California once, one of them held me up at the rifle's point for four dollars a bucket for water. He

had the only well for miles around and I had to pay his price."

"And you think——" began Dr. Duncan.

"That this old fellow is trying the same game. He fired at the boys to scare them and show them that he meant business."

"But you won't submit——"

"I should say not. More especially as the old rascal has chopped down the signal post."

"What can we do?" asked Ned anxiously.

"We must go over there in force. Some way will suggest itself. First I want to take a good look at the old chap and have some words with him. He may prove amenable to argument."

"I don't think so," declared Ned indignantly, recollecting the scream of the bullet as it had passed uncomfortably close above his head.

"Well, we shall see. Duncan, we had better take our rifles. Not to use them, of course, but a show of force may scare the old fellow into being reasonable."

The doctor nodded and took the two rifles out of the rack under the seat where they were kept. Thus armed, the party set forth for the water-hole, the two men riding behind Ned and Tom on their machines. As they neared the place, Mr. Chilvers said that it would be best to stop and leave the machines where they were, proceeding on foot.

The boys were told to walk behind the two men who, with determined steps, advanced up the rise beyond which lay the camp of the old desert curmudgeon. Ned and Tom couldn't help grinning, as they walked along, over the peculiar antics of old "monkey-face," as Tom had dubbed him.

"It would have been no laughing matter, though, if that bullet had hit us," Ned reminded him.

"No, I guess the old dog-in-the-manger meant business, as Uncle Hugh said," agreed Tom.

Mr. Chilvers was the first to gain the summit

of the ridge with Dr. Duncan close beside him. The boys, disregarding the caution of their elders, stood alongside but a short distance off. At the sound of footsteps, the old man raised his malicious little red eyes once more.

"What d'ye want? What d'ye want? Oh! what d'ye want?" he shrilled out in his peevish piping tones.

"Some of that water," responded Mr. Chilvers firmly. "I'd also like to know by what right you chopped that post down. Don't you know it marks the site of the water-hole, and can be seen for miles?"

The old man mumbled something and then burst into fresh invective.

"He! he! he!" he chuckled vindictively, "I've got the water. Possession's nine points of the law. If you want water, you must pay me money."

"How much do you want a pail?" asked Mr. Chilvers, unwilling to precipitate hostilities.

"Five dollars a pail! Five dollars a pail for this nice, cool water. Five dollars a pail or you'll die of thirst."

"Well, if you aren't a nice, genteel old pirate," breathed the miner to himself and his party.

Then, aloud, he hailed the old man once more.

"We'll give you twenty-five cents a pail and not a cent more."

"Then you'll get no water; he! he! he!"

The hideous, ape-like old figure sprang to its feet and ran around to the other side of the water-hole, squatting back amid its filthy rags, the rifle raised and leveled. Chilvers, more as a test than anything else, advanced a step down the incline, at the bottom of which lay the water-hole and its repulsive old guardian.

Instantly the old man broke out into fresh gibberings.

"Don't come any closer or I'll fire! Five dollars a bucket, that's my bedrock price."

"The old varmint," grated out Chilvers angrily,

"I guess he means it, too. I know his type. We must try other means. Sometimes a bluff will work wonders."

The rifles had been left a few paces back, it not being deemed wise to anger the old man by showing them at first. Now, however, Tom's uncle determined on stern measures. Motioning to the others, he whispered to them to drop back to where the rifles were. He and Dr. Duncan each picked up one; the boys both had revolvers.

"Don't fire, whatever happens," cautioned Mr. Chilvers, "I think that we can bring him to terms without that."

So saying he crept up the sandy ridge, the others close beside him.

"Now then, old man," he said boldly, "there's four of us here and all armed. Will you take twenty-five cents a bucket, or do we have to get that water by force?"

The answer came quickly. Far more quickly

than the miner, prepared as he was, had anticipated.

Bang!

A bullet whizzed through the air, struck the butt of Mr. Chilvers' rifle and went screaming off across the desert.

"He! he! he" chuckled the hideous old man, "the next one will come closer. Don't raise that rifle or you're a dead man."

The miner looked perplexed. The old man was either crazy or vicious to a degree. At any rate, he was as deadly with his rifle as a rattlesnake with its fangs. That he was a dead shot and didn't hesitate to display his skill at the risk of taking a human life was also uncomfortably evident.

"We shan't accomplish anything this way," said the miner to Dr. Duncan perplexedly; "perhaps we had better try what a flank movement will do. It might be a good scheme if, while you and the boys stand here and engage his at-

tention, I creep round behind him and rush on him and disarm him."

"That sounds like a good plan," agreed the doctor, "but it's pretty risky to you. If he should hear you coming——"

"I'll take chances on that," declared Chilvers briefly, preparing to go.

It was just at this instant, however, that a diversion occurred. On the other side of the hollow there appeared a figure on a motor cycle. It was Wing Lung riding furiously. He saw the steep incline before him when it was too late, and with a loud yell of:

"Wallee maller!" he plunged over the brink.

The old man standing by the water hole was utterly unprepared, as were the rest, for this apparition. Down the steep pitch plunged the motor cycle like a projectile from a gun. Wing clung to the handle bars for his life, forgetting even to yell in his alarm.

Like a flash the old man switched around to

face this new and unpremeditated attack. As he did so, Chilvers shouted, "Now," and began to run down the bank. When he was half way down, the old man turned around once more. He aimed at the miner and his finger was pressing the trigger when something that must have felt like the onslaught of a mad bull struck him from behind. It was Wing Lung and his "Lattlesnake."

Coming at the pace they were when motor cycle and rider struck the old man, he had no time to utter more than an alarmed squeak of terror. The rifle exploded, but the bullet went up in the air. At the same instant the old man, tossed as if by the same angry bull to which we have compared Wing and his cycle, shot upward likewise.

Describing what geometricians would call a graceful parabola, the old man sailed through the air for a few feet and then began to descend. In the meantime Wing Lung, yelling like one

possessed, had shot beneath him, landing with a crash in the water hole, which, be it said, was mostly mud. Hardly had the luckless Chinee sunk head over heels in the oozy stuff before whack! down came the old man, landing on top of the Celestial with a dull thud.

Then from the water hole proceeded what Tom afterward described as "a racket like a cat fight." The old man and the Chinaman, each persuaded he was tackling a mortal enemy, rolled over and over in the mud, clawing, scratching and biting for all they were worth. When the others, shaking with laughter, reached the edge of the hole, they saw, as if they were looking into a bear pit, the furious contest of the two. Mud and water flew in clouds. Amid the smother, about all the onlookers could see was a tangle of arms and legs.

As soon as he could speak for laughter, Mr. Chilvers declared that the battle had gone far enough. Leaping into the hole, followed by the

boys, he soon had both contestants dragged out. And sorry looking sights they were.

Plastered with mud from head to foot, dripping with water and both still furiously angry, they resembled nothing so much as a pair of fighting tom-cats over whom someone has thrown a bucket of water. Wing Lung yelled; the old man shrieked.

At last order was restored and some of the mud scraped off the old fellow. Wing Lung's machine was fished out and found not to be much damaged. In fact, as Tom declared, it would have been impossible to injure that redoubtable machine in any fresh place, so many scars of battle it had already received.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you," declared Dr. Duncan, trying to look seriously at the two battered objects before him, but failing lamentably.

"I guess the price of water's gone down," grinned Tom mischievously.

In the meantime Wing Lung's part in the episode was explained. He had been riding in search of the hole and as usual had lost his way. He had no idea as he came speeding along that the hollow lay before him. When he did see it, it was too late to do anything but keep right on.

"And it was a very good thing that you did, Wing," said Mr. Chilvers approvingly. "You drew the teeth of his Honor here most effectively."

"Oh, me velly cleveh Chinee," grinned Wing; "me catchum clean clothes bimeby, so be."

"Well, you'd better, or you won't stay with this outfit," said Dr. Duncan as sternly as he could.

"Well, old man," said Mr. Chilvers to the now tamed old water-watcher, "the price of water has come down, I guess, hasn't it?"

"Take it. Take all you want at twenty-five cents a bucket," was the generous reply.

"Well, of all the nerve!" gasped Tom.

But Ned interrupted.

"I guess we've had as much fun as we could have got in any circus at twenty-five cents a seat," he said.

"I agree with you," laughed Mr. Chilvers; "two bits a bucket, it is. But let this be a lesson to you, old man, don't ever try to play 'dog in the manger' unless you are mighty sure of your position."

The old man snuffled and shifted from one foot to the other so abjectly that they really felt sorry for him. He was a "busted" prospector, he informed them, and when he found that they wanted water he thought he saw a way to make some money out of them.

"But how did you expect anyone to find the water hole without the signal pole being up?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I didn't think of that," snuffled the old man, who appeared to be half witted.

Soon after Wing had gone back to the auto

for clean clothes, Nat and Al put in an appearance, having followed directions to swing to the north. Dinner was eaten at the water hole, which was dug out to quite a depth by the boys. The auto was then brought up, to the great wonderment of the surly old prospector, and the water tank filled. Before they left, the old man received the money to which, as a matter of fact, he was in no wise entitled after his behavior, and the last they saw of him he was trotting off across the desert on his lean nag. Soon after, they took up the trail once more, having first reërected the pole and nailed a bit of canvas to it as an additional guide.

Thus, laughably, ended an adventure that for a time had its serious aspect.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEVIL'S PUNCH BOWL.

At twilight, after a trying afternoon's travel, they found themselves on the verge of a curious formation. All day they had been pressing forward through weird-looking ranges that appeared as if they had but newly emerged from the blast furnace of Nature. Streaks of red, yellow, orange and blue lay in strata in these strange hills. Great boulders were scattered all about, sometimes in fantastic shapes like men or wild beasts, or again bearing a resemblance to feudal castles. Piled high by some prehistoric forces, such sights met them on every side.

Not a blade of grass, not a drop of water, nor a sprig of green appeared in these desolate and forbidding ranges. All was gray, lonely and monotonous, except for the ever-changing

forms and colors of the hills. The trail had been left some miles back, where it branched off toward the distant Greenhorn range.

The hills that they were now traveling through were known by the cheerful appellation of the Coffin Mountains. The name appeared to suit them. The boys found them depressing to a degree. Nothing like these dreary hills had ever been seen by them before. They carried a sense of foreboding, of impending evil amid their dreary solitudes.

"Few white men have traveled this path before," Mr. Chilvers had said as they left the trail. "Fewer still ever came back," he added gloomily. The boys knew that he was thinking of his dead partner, whose life had been claimed by the desert.

As the sun was setting, tinting the sinister Coffin Mountains with blood red hues and dark, purple shadows, they found themselves, as we have said, on the edge of a curious formation.

Apparently, at some remote day, a river had dashed down the ravine in which this freak of nature was situated. Seemingly, too, great stones, carried by the impetuous torrent, had been given a swirling motion in some depression of the river bed. A circular impulse, which continued through uncounted centuries, had hollowed out the softer sandstone beneath as if by the chisel of a wood carver.

The river had dried up ages since; but the strange trace of its handiwork, a big bowl fifty feet across and almost as deep, remained. At the bottom lay the huge rocks that had hollowed out this natural bowl amid the desert hills.

"I suppose, according to the rule in vogue in all parts of our country, this hollow might be called 'The Devil's Punch Bowl,'" remarked Dr. Duncan as he stood on the brink of it.

They all agreed that it savored of his satanic majesty in its uncanny depth and queer formation. The boys peered curiously over the edge

of it. The declining sun had left the bottom shrouded in violet shadows, with inky black gloom between the huge rocks that lay piled at the bottom.

Suddenly there came a loud cry from Al Anderson. He had been leaning over the edge like the others, but had perhaps craned his neck a trifle further. Whatever the cause, the ground under him suddenly gave way and he shot down the steep incline as fast, or faster, than the landslide of rocks and earth that went with him.

For an instant all was consternation. Then Dr. Duncan's voice rang out.

"What has happened?"

"It's Al Anderson!" yelled Tom. "He's fallen into the hole!"

"Are you hurt, Al?" yelled Ned, placing his hands funnelwise at his mouth.

"No; that is, at least I don't think so. I'm cut and bruised but no bones broken."

This message, coming from the depths of the

hole, relieved their minds immensely. It was now almost too dark to see, for the night falls rapidly in those parts. But Al's voice had a reassuring ring to it.

"I wish you'd hurry up and get me out, though," he shouted the next minute. "I can't climb up. It's too steep."

"All right, my boy," the doctor assured him; "just be patient a few minutes and we'll have you out."

"Very well, sir," was the reply.

"Wing, get that rope out of the auto," ordered Dr. Duncan the next minute.

This was a rope which, together with a block and tackle, formed part of their equipment, and which they hoped would prove useful for a variety of purposes when they reached the lost mine.

Little did they think, though, when it was included among the supplies, that it would serve its first purpose by saving a human life. Wing was still hauling the line out of its case when

from the Punch Bowl there came a shrill, piercing cry of terror.

"Wallee maller!" gasped Wing, and then, "One boy heap scared—so be!"

"Hurry with that rope, Wing!" came a shouted order from Dr. Duncan.

"Allee litee, me come!" answered the Chinee, all his senses on the alert.

What had happened was this. While Wing was getting the rope and all the others were on the edge of the bowl shouting encouragement to poor Al the boy had suddenly shouted:

"There's something down here; an animal or something. Oh, do hurry and get me out. I——"

Then had come the cry of terror that reached Wing's ears as he busied himself with the rope.

"What is it, my boy? What's the matter?" cried Dr. Duncan, genuinely alarmed.

"It's—it's something. I don't know what it

is, but it's gliding about. Oh! there are more of them! They are on every side of me!"

Mr. Chilvers, with a sharp exclamation, drew Dr. Duncan aside.

"Great Scott! Duncan, lose no time in getting that boy out of there," he exclaimed.

His voice shook with agitation. The doctor gazed at the ordinarily cool-headed adventurer with undisguised alarm. He knew that the peril must be grave indeed that could thus unman him.

"For Heaven's sake, Chilvers," he breathed intensely, "what is it? Speak up, man!"

"That—that boy is in the gravest danger that he will ever be in all his life," was the rejoinder.

Chilvers paused to choke back his emotion. Then he added, clutching the doctor's arm in a tight grip:

"Unless I am mistaken—and I pray heaven I may be—he has fallen into a den of desert rattlers, the deadliest snake of this continent!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEN OF RATTLERS.

"For goodness sake, hurry up!"

Al's voice came pleadingly out of the dark depths.

"Yes, Al, yes, old man, we're hurrying all we can," rejoined Ned, as he, the doctor and Chilvers wrought with desperate earnestness to get the rope straightened out and heave it over the edge.

There was good reason, as the miner had figured out, for Al's terror as he crouched in the bottom of the bowl among the jagged rocks and boulders. At first, in his relief at finding himself unhurt, he had not paid much attention to his surroundings, possessing himself in patience till aid could come from above.

His first notification that he was not the only living thing at the bottom of the bowl came when

he was aware of a sort of odd rustling sound, not unlike the swishing noise produced by a lady's silk dress. He could not imagine what it was. It was almost dark at the bottom of the pit, but in the semi-gloom he looked about him.

At first he could see nothing; but presently he saw something move in the crack of a rock close to him. He eyed the moving object for an instant without exactly taking in what it was. Suddenly, however, he became aware that what he had seen was a wicked, triangular head, with deep, leaden eyes set in two protuberances. The head was swaying back and forth and the eyes were fixed upon him.

Al, like all California boys, had seen rattlesnakes and killed them. But although he instantly recognized the snake that was eying him as a rattler, it was like no other that he had ever seen. Unbelievably large, fearfully vindictive looking, it made his blood run cold as he watched it. It held his gaze with a sort of fascination

similar, we may imagine, to that of a bird when hypnotized by one of these great snakes.

Hardly had the lad made the alarming discovery that the bottom of the bowl was shared by such a formidable serpent, than from all sides he began to hear a sort of slithering noise, as hundreds of snakes slid over the rocks. The noise came from their scales as they squirmed their way toward him. Now and then the curious dry sound of a rattle reached him—like the sound of dried peas shaken in a pod.

It was at that instant that Al, his nerves racked beyond all control, had given vent to the cry of terror that had so alarmed those above.

"It's snakes—rattlers," he shouted up, in response to a question Chilvers now hurled down at him in a trembling voice, "scores, hundreds of them."

"Keep quite still, Al," ordered Chilvers, in a voice as cold as steel; "don't move any more than you have to. Help will be there in a minute."

"All right, sir," rejoined Al bravely.

"Hurry up with that rope," snapped the miner, whose nerves were strained almost to the snapping point. The thought of that lad in the dark pit surrounded by rattlers in unknown quantities completely unnerved him, as, indeed, it did the others. In their confusion and excitement they tangled the rope several times before it was ready to be lowered.

"Where are you, Al?" hailed the miner in a tense voice when all was ready.

"Right below you. I can see your figure against the sky. They—they are coming closer."

"Stick tight now. Don't move till you've got the rope under your arms, and then we'll have you out in a jiffy," hailed Chilvers in a cheery voice.

To Al the pit now appeared to be literally alive with rattlers. On every side he could hear the repulsive sound of their bodies as they dragged them over the rough rocks. That he could not see them only added to the horror of the situa-

tion. For all he knew they might be crawling about his very feet. One thing he did know. The whole air was impregnated with the smell of musk, the rank, offensive odor peculiar to snakes. It sickened him. But, with a courage that could not have been outdone by a veteran plainsman, Al did as he had been told and hardly moved a muscle as he leaned against the edge of the bowl.

At last, above his head, he heard a faint rasping sound. For one dreadful instant, so taut strung were his nerves, he thought it was another serpent. But the next instant, with a quick throb of thankfulness, he realized that it was the rope lowered by his friends from above.

As it danced and swayed in front of him, Al realized that the most risky portion of his enforced sojourn in the snake den lay before him. The slightest move might cause some snake that lay near him to strike. But what had to be done must be done. Steeling himself, he formed a

loop under his arms with trembling hands and drew it over tight, knotting it securely.

Hardly had he done this, before he sensed, rather than saw, an object at his very foot. Half frantic with fear, the boy kicked out with might and main. A sharp hiss and a hard blow on his boot followed. The rattler had struck, but thanks to his stout boots the fangs had not touched Al's skin.

"Haul up!" he cried, his nerve now entirely gone. In fact he was on the verge of a collapse from sheer panic-stricken terror.

Any one of my readers who is inclined to blame Al for timidity should spend an hour, as the author once did, in an abandoned mining "adit" or tunnel, with the way to the entrance barred by two big diamond backs. One such experience is enough for several lifetimes. In the west the author has also met men—not old men—whose hair was white as snow after passing through just such an experience as Al's.

They hauled with a will. It was in the nick of time, too. When Al struck out with his foot, the scaled hordes that were waiting some such move came on with a rush. Their bodies scraped and scratched like files as, hissing and rattling, they wrigged over the rocks and out of scores of crevices and seams.

But Al did not hear them. The boy, drawn to the brink of the bowl a few seconds later, was past all knowledge of what was taking place about him. The strain over, Al had fainted, and it was some time before they brought him back to his senses. It was longer still—weeks in fact—before the boy got over an experience which might well have racked beyond endurance stouter nerves and more tried bodies than his.

As for Chilvers, he had your true Westerner's hatred of a rattler.

"There's going to be a slaughter of rattlers to-night such as has rarely been seen in this part of the country," he declared vehemently, as Al

was brought to. "Those beasts have been multiplying there unmolested for scores, maybe hundreds of years. A few hundred of them will go out to-night."

They did not understand just what he meant till, from the auto, he brought two sticks of giant powder, or dynamite, about as big as an ordinary candle. These formed part of the supplies, of necessity, on a mining enterprise, such as theirs.

To the end of the sticks he carefully attached two fulminate of mercury copper caps, handling them very gingerly. This done, wires were attached to the two caps, or fuses, and led to a battery box.

The boys watched these proceedings with great interest. This did not abate when the miner lowered the two sticks cautiously till they rested on the bottom of the punchbowl. This done, he carried the battery back to a safe distance, warning them all to retreat beyond him.

"All ready," he declared at length. "Al, my boy, how would you like to be the instrument of vengeance on that pitful of beasts?"

Al, still white and shaky, looked at him curiously.

"I mean, do you want to press the switch and send a few hundred of their snakeships to Kingdom Come?"

"You bet I would," declared Al with a shiver; "it'll be a tong lime—I mean a long time—before I forget those rattlers."

"All right. Now grab this key. That's it. When I say 'Go!' you press it down and see what happens. Are you ready?"

"Ready!" rejoined Al.

"Go!"

The boy pressed down the key. From the battery there came a sputter of blue flame.

Down through the wires sped the bolt of electricity that would ignite the fulminate caps, that

would in turn detonate and set off the dynamite.

A roar, a red flash, and a concussion that shook the earth under their feet followed the pressing of the switch. From the mouth of the bowl a shower of stones shot up amid a fountain of red flame. Then a great quiet succeeded.

"I guess there's a few less scaled devils in the world right now," grimly remarked the miner as he disconnected the battery.

And so it proved. In the morning, when they made an inspection of the bowl, the entire bottom was littered with broken rocks, shattered by the explosion, while amid the riven, blackened fragments could be seen the torn, mangled bodies of hundreds of rattlers.

"We may not have killed all the rattlers down there, but we've drawn some of the fangs of the Devil's Punch Bowl," said the miner with satisfaction, as he regarded the effect of his dynamite.

"It was a fitting brew that it contained," added Dr. Duncan, with his hands on Al's shoulder. As he spoke, he felt the boy shudder at the recollection of his sojourn in the rattlers' den.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DANCING HALOS.

Early that morning there was the usual scene of bustle about the camp. But little time was spent over breakfast and the chug-chugging of the motor cycles and the auto soon announced the impatience of the party to be off. There was a good reason for this. Mr. Chilvers had announced at supper the night before that another day ought to bring them within sight of the range beyond which lay the Lost Mine.

That morning they were due to enter the Bitter Creek desert, perhaps the hardest, most arduous part of their adventurous journey. They felt no reluctance in leaving behind them the camp of the Devil's Punch Bowl. Least of all Al, whose face was still pale from the recollection of his terrible ordeal.

By midday they found themselves on the summit of the last hills of the range they had been passing through, looking out over a glittering, shimmering sea of alkali and sand.

"The Bitter Creek desert," announced Mr. Chilvers, as they paused on the top of the last ridge and gazed at the scene before them. Far on the horizon, like faint blue clouds, lay what the miner told them was the range nearest the gold fields for which they were making.

But two hundred miles still stretched between themselves and the distant hills, although, owing to the wonderful clarity of the atmosphere and the height at which they had halted, it did not look to be half that distance. Midway across, along the Bitter Creek, there were alkaline springs. The travelers would be compelled to replenish their water supply at these, making the water fit to drink by means of a condensing apparatus. This device had been evolved by the doctor as a result of his many travels into coun-

tries where the water was not fit in its natural state for human consumption.

"What are those odd-looking lights dancing above the alkali?" asked Ned presently.

His remark called general attention to something they had not noticed before. Above the shimmering face of the desert they could now see that great circles of light appeared to be hovering. These were seen in every direction. The phenomenon was so extraordinary as to be almost startling. The boys even exchanged uneasy glances. Small things on the lonely desert alarm the traveler who faces them for the first time. There was, in fact, something very uncanny in these dancing, gleaming circles of light. Now they flashed like flames, and again they dissolved into all the colors of the rainbow like soap bubbles bursting.

"Our eyes must be playing us tricks," declared Tom, regarding the phenomena of the irradiating circles.

Mr. Chilvers smiled.

"No, your eyes are all right, Tom. I'm surprised, in fact, that we have not seen this sight before. Yonder circles of light are called 'desert halos.'"

"That's just what they look like—the halos around the heads of saints in the church windows at home," cried Ned.

"Have they any particular significance?" inquired Tom. "Do they mean bad weather or—or anything like that?"

"Not always," was the response; "sometimes they appear just as you see them now for no apparent reason, and then again——"

The miner paused, shielding his eyes with one hand and gazing at the dancing halos. They all looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

"And then again," he went on, "they may mean that some sort of a storm is brewing."

"Do you think that on the present occasion

they have any such significance?" inquired the doctor.

"It's impossible to say. But I don't think so," was the rather evasive rejoinder.

But in spite of Mr. Chilvers' careless manner, the boys noted that his face had taken on a grave expression since his attention had been drawn to the dancing halos. He looked troubled, in fact. But this condition only lasted for a moment. He speedily resumed his customary firmness of manner, and the word to go forward once more was given.

Most of the morning they traveled onward at a fair pace. Ned and Tom rode side by side, with the others close behind and the auto bringing up the rear. It was almost noon when Ned, who had not spoken for some time, addressed his companion.

"Notice anything odd about the weather, Tom?"

"No; except that it seems unusually sultry even for this part of the world."

"You're right. I haven't felt it so oppressive since we started out, and, Tom, look yonder."

He pointed to the western horizon. Neither boy had looked up for some time, until Ned had gazed westward and been startled by what he saw. Now that he drew Tom's attention to it, the other boy was equally astonished.

"There's a storm brewing, sure as guns," said Tom.

"Yes, but what kind of a storm? I never saw such a sky, even in the tropics."

"It's as black as ink, and yet it doesn't look like a thunderstorm—at least as we know them. I wonder if those dancing halos weren't the forerunners of some terrible hurricane?"

"I don't know. All I know is that we are in for something, and something pretty bad, to judge by the looks of it."

Looking directly westward, the appearance of

the sky was indeed startling. Tom had described it as inky black, but this description was not altogether correct, although at first sight the heavens did appear to have been covered by a sable pall.

The color of the sky before them was more of a greenish black, with an underglow of lurid copper beneath its ragged edges. The sun was still shining brightly where they were, which made the approach of the tempest the more startling. In the west everything was being rapidly overshadowed by the advancing storm. It was as if night had fallen directly in front of them, while they still rode in brilliant, blinding sunlight.

While they still looked, a zig-zag ribbon of lambent flame flickered across the dark curtain of cloud. It was followed by another and another till the dark fabric was slashed and torn by lightning in every direction.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" gasped Tom.

"No; it is wonderful; but just the same I'd rather we hadn't met it."

"Same here. Have you noticed that there is no thunder, nor any sign of rain?"

"Yes; and I know, too, that these dry storms are the most dangerous."

"Take a look back and see what the others are doing."

Both boys gazed back just in time to catch sight of Mr. Chilvers waving and shouting to them to halt. They did so instantly, as did the others, who had already been watching with awed and fascinated eyes the approach of the huge cloud curtain which now blotted out the entire horizon. As if sable draperies were being drawn toward the sun by invisible, giant hands, the clouds swept on, and before many minutes had passed the sun was blotted out and a dim twilight fell over the desert.

By this time they had obeyed the orders of Mr. Chilvers to make everything secure. The

motor cycles were lashed to the auto, and everything that might stand a chance of being blown away was made fast. Mr. Chilvers did not say much while these preparations were being made, but his anxious looks spoke volumes. It was clear that he feared that a terrific wind would accompany the breaking of the storm.

Although it was almost dark, the atmosphere had a ghastly tinge in it that made their faces, when they looked at each other, livid and unearthly. An odd sort of odor was in the air, too, a sulphurous smell that made their nostrils tingle. When everything had been made snug, as Mr. Chilvers called it, they all, by a common impulse, watched the scene about them.

The whole desert was shrouded in a pall of darkness and the lightning still ripped and tore through the black cloud draperies, but as yet not one drop of rain had fallen, nor had the rumble of thunder resounded. Except for the vicious zip and crackle of the lightning there was not a

sound. It was this utter silence that made the oncoming of the storm the more awe-inspiring and uncanny.

Motionless and wordless, they stood by the side of the automobile watching the inky heavens.

Suddenly in the sky there appeared an extraordinary sight. Imagine a vast form resembling a balloon, slightly inclined to one side and spinning on its axis faster than the fastest top, and you have an idea of the strange spectacle that the clouds presented. At the bottom, the snout-like appendage in which the mass ended wavered about as though feeling for something it expected to meet coming up to it from the earth. From its violent gyrations it appeared almost, in fact, as if the upper part of the strange formation was trying to tear itself loose.

And now from the face of the desert another "snout" was raised, attached to a similar balloon. It was some distance behind the formation which depended from the sky, but advanced toward it

with great rapidity. It was at this moment that the most extraordinary performance of all took place. The two silently whirling balloons, each a hundred feet in height and so black that they stood out sharply silhouetted against the surrounding gloom, now began a witches' dance in the firmament. Sometimes they leaned far back and then danced forward as if saluting each other. Then for an instant they would "balance," and then begin a sort of solemn hopping up and down. Then they would dart from each other as if repelled by some unseen force. Again they appeared about to rush into each other's arms, only to whirl off once more and resume their weird dance in the skies.

It seemed to be almost an interminable time that this scene lasted, although it may not have been so very many minutes. At last a low moaning noise arose in the air. It sounded not unlike the breaking of an angry sea on a rocky coast. Coming after the long silence, it conveyed a

distinct thrill to the watchers of this extraordinary convulsion of nature.

Suddenly, while the balloon-like forms were still going through one of their stately saluting ceremonies, they rushed together. Snout closed on snout, and they formed one giant, pitchy column reaching from the earth to the skies.

No shock was perceptible when they met, but from amid the murky folds lightning flashed in livid sheets, as heat lightning plays on the horizon at the close of a warm day.

Having met, the two forms now appeared to engage in a Titanic struggle. Round and round they spun, wavering, leaning, dancing hither and thither, as if they were fighting out a wrestling match.

At times they leaned far over to one side as if the whole terrifying fabric was about to fall. Then recovering they spun round with bewildering swiftness. All the time there was a steady roar, like that of a giant cataract.

Unable to speak, unable even to move, the boys watched this ghostly dance in great alarm. From time to time the lightning illumined their pallid faces. Once Ned glanced around at Mr. Chilvers. His face was set and drawn as the light played upon it flickeringly. He was saying something to Dr. Duncan.

"I've seen desert storms, but this is the worst I have ever witnessed."

Ned could well believe the truth of that statement. He would not, till that instant, have believed that earth held such a terrifying spectacle.

Suddenly there came a shout from Tom:

"It's coming this way!"

"Get to cover! Crawl under the auto and hold tight for your lives!" shouted Mr. Chilvers, galvanizing into sudden action. A scramble for the shelter of the heavy car followed.

"Tornadoes and tarantulas, we'll be lucky if we get out of this with whole skins!" shouted

Nat to Ned as they sought shelter. The boy had to strain his voice to make himself heard above the crash and fury of the storm, which was now overwhelming.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MINE AT LAST!

Crouching beneath the auto, the position of the travelers was not an enviable one. The closer approach of the storm was attended by an appalling roar. The face of the desert in the near vicinity of the dancing columns was being sucked up into a whirling vortex. The lightning was now incessant, lighting up the scene with unholy fires.

Nobody spoke a word. In fact, even a shout would hardly have carried more than a hand's breadth in that ear-splitting turmoil. The air became full of sand and small pebbles. Instinctively the boys lay on their faces clutching the ground as if they feared being blown away.

"If that pillar of cloud or whatever it is ever

hits us," thought Ned to himself, "it means good-bye."

He was clutching the spokes of one of the auto's hind wheels at the moment. He distinctly felt the immensely heavy machine rise an inch or so and then settle down again with a bump.

"Not even the auto can remain steady in such a case," he thought, with additional alarm; "it will be swept away like a straw and we will go whirling after it to be dashed to death somewhere out on the desert."

The thought had hardly flashed through his mind when there came a glare of lightning so fearfully vivid that it seemed to sear his eyes. Blinded for one instant, the next moment a deafening crash, like the report of a huge gun, deprived the boy of hearing.

How long he lay there half stunned he never knew, but in reality it was not many minutes before Mr. Chilvers was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Ned, my boy, are you all right?"

"Yes; I'm all right," responded Ned as he realized the fact, "but how about the others?"

"Nobody hurt, thank Heaven, and the climax of the storm has passed."

"You mean that whirlwind, that desert water-spout?"

"That's a good name for it, although sand-spout would be better. Yes, I'm glad to say that it passed us some distance to the south. Had its center struck us, there would have been a different tale to tell."

"You mean that it would have sucked up even this heavy auto?"

"Just what I mean, my boy. We should all have been caught in it like so many straws and whirled upward in that funnel, to land—who knows where!"

Ned could not repress a shudder at the thought of the fate that they had so narrowly escaped. From the moment that he had felt the auto lift

and shiver, he had imagined that they were doomed to a fearful death. The relief was for a moment almost more than he could bear. But the shouts of his companions soon aroused him, and crawling from under the auto he joined them as they watched the storm whirling off toward the east.

Such a display of elemental fury cannot in the nature of things last long, and they could now view in the distance the subsidence of the dancing columns and the flickering of the lightning as it died away off on the eastern horizon. Suddenly the whirling pillars seemed to be drawn upward into the skies, doubtless to descend again some distance further on and continue their furious work of destruction.

After a time the sky began to clear. A gentle wind, the aftermath of the hurricane, blew against their faces, and by the time Wing had dinner cooked—using the blue flame oil stove for the purpose, as no sage was handy—the last

trace of the storm had almost vanished. The meal was eaten with a zest unblunted by the ordeal they had been through, and when it was finished the sun was shining out once more, and only a dark pall of cloud behind them remained to tell of what had been.

"Well," remarked Ned at the conclusion of a discussion of the storm, "if that's a desert storm excuse me from any more of them. I thought that the auto would surely be blown off us like the shell off so many turtles, and that we would be scattered about like bits of torn paper."

"I guess we all were of the same opinion for a time," agreed Dr. Duncan. "I know that personally I dug my nails into the ground—as if that would have helped me at all—and held on for dear life."

"I've been through desert storms," said Mr. Chilvers, "many of them, but that one was the worst I have ever experienced. The wind must

have blown a hundred miles an hour while it was at its height."

"Seemed to me like a thousand," grinned Tom. "What's the cause of such violent storms out here, anyhow?"

"Meteorologists are undecided," rejoined Dr. Duncan, "but the general opinion seems to be that such vast tracts of superheated land induce some sort of a vacuum which nature rushes in to fill, producing electrical disturbances of a most violent character."

The motor cycles were now unlashed, the boys praising the precaution that was responsible for their safety. Had it not been for Mr. Chilvers' foresight, the light machines would have undoubtedly been scattered broadcast and smashed beyond hope of repair. Such an accident would have been serious in the extreme, considering their situation.

All the young riders found it necessary to replenish the gasolene tanks of their mounts, and

one after another they filled them at the fuel tank carried on the auto. This being done, a fresh start was made, the next stopping place being announced as the Bitter Creek springs.

As usual, Ned and Tom rode in advance. Toward the middle of the afternoon a slight haze became visible in front of them. On being appealed to, Mr. Chilvers announced that the haze marked the course of Bitter Creek; and the boys, with a whoop of delight at the prospect of seeing something to vary the monotony of the desert, dashed forward at full speed. They arrived at the brink of the creek some time before the auto put in its appearance.

The creek ran between two steep banks. In fact, it appeared that the channel had been cut out of the desert, a carved groove, so to speak, at the bottom of which a thin thread of water ran. The banks were almost fifty feet in height in some places, and in others they shelved down to not more than ten feet.

"I'm dying for a drink," announced Tom, "and I'm going to sample some of that water."

"Better not," warned Ned; "I'll bet it isn't called Bitter Creek for nothing."

But the water, what there was of it, looked clear and inviting as it rippled along over its "hard-pan" bed. In that pitiless land, in fact, any sort of water almost looks inviting.

Coming to a likely-looking place to descend, Tom dismounted and scrambled down the bank. It was a precipitous climb, and Tom's descent might more accurately be described as a slide. He lost no time in throwing himself flat by the side of the tempting-looking water and trying it. One mouthful was enough.

"Pah!" he exclaimed, and spat out what he had taken with the look of some one who had inadvertently tackled an "overripe" egg.

Ned doubled up with laughter at the sight of his chum's disgusted face.

"What's the trouble, Tom?" he hailed, when he was able to speak. "Isn't it nice?"

"Nice! Oh, gracious! Some one up above here has been dumping rotten eggs in it, I guess."

"Stung!" laughed Ned. "Maybe you'll take some stock in what your uncle says after this."

"I sure will. Oh! I'll never get that taste out of my mouth. It's—it's *awful!*"

"Must have a lot of sulphur and alkali in it, I reckon," remarked Ned.

As he was speaking, Nat, Al and Wing Lung came riding up. They saw what was going forward and eagerly inquired as to what kind of water it was in the creek.

"Fine!" exclaimed Tom, smacking his lips as if with huge relish, "cool and sweet, better than ice cream soda."

That was enough for the parched and dusty newcomers. They lost no time in dismounting and hastening down the bank. Such was Wing's hurry, in fact, that his loose blouse caught on a

projecting boulder and he hung suspended, unable to move. He appealed to the others to help him, but so intent were they on sampling Tom's "fountain" that they gave no attention to the luckless or, as it turned out, lucky Chinee.

Tom turned to Ned with a wink as Nat and Al plumped down on their knees and eagerly took in big mouthfuls of the waters of Bitter Creek.

"Wait for the explosion!" he cried in a whisper that carried.

The explosion was not long in coming.

"Oh-h-h-h-h-h-h-h! Epsom salts!"

"Jumping bob cats and pelicans! It's poisoned!"

"Tastes like matches and rotten eggs mixed."

"No; dead rats and punk tomatoes!"

The two boys, vying with each other's descriptive powers to describe the awful taste of Bitter Creek, danced about trying to rid themselves of the flavor. Suddenly they caught sight of Tom laughing as if he would split his sides. Then it

dawned on them that they were the victims of a joke. Making common cause, they pounced on Tom before he could make a move to defend himself.

It was at this moment that Wing Lung disengaged himself from the rock and came down the bank like a runaway locomotive.

"Crouse him in the dreek—I mean douse him in the creek!" roared Al, as Tom vainly struggled in the grip of the two irate lads.

"Tin pots and turpentine, yes!" bellowed Nat. "Oh, that awful water!"

A wild yell and a crash came at the same instant. Wing brought up his greased-lightning slide down the bank in the midst of the group. Struggling as they were, none of them was prepared for the Mongolian battering ram. Nat and Al went down in a heap on top of the struggling Tom, and an instant later all four of them, including Wing, were splashing in the waters they had sampled so disadvantageously.

When they picked themselves up it looked for a minute as if there was going to be a real battle. But it was Wing Lung who saved the day and the loss of their tempers. In his involuntary plunge, the Chinee had absorbed a considerable mouthful of Bitter Creek. The sight of him dancing about and yelling that he had been poisoned was too much for their risibles. They broke into peals of hearty boyish laughter, and with their merriment their momentary anger vanished. But the taste of Bitter Creek remained with them for some time thereafter.

The springs, it transpired, were located further up the creek and the water from them, when condensed, was not so bad; but still it wasn't very palatable, and the boys left no regrets behind when they left Bitter Creek and pushed on steadily toward the distant mountains.

By noon of the next day the range was plainly visible, and that afternoon they found themselves in it. It was sundown when they crested a slope

and saw lying before them a vast expanse of hills and desert land, as empty and monotonous, apparently, as those they had already traversed. As he gazed all about him, taking in every detail of the dreary landscape, Mr. Chilvers' face was flushed with unwonted excitement. Suddenly he half rose in the seat of the auto and pointed.

"The Lost Mine!" he cried in a voice which shook with suppressed eagerness. "There it is, right ahead of us!"

The boys followed the direction of the miner's pointing finger. Beyond the range whose summit they had reached lay a singular, isolated hill. It stood up purple and black against the flush of the western sky. The next moment the boys broke into an irrepressible cheer. The goal they had come so far to attain was in sight! Before them lay the end of the long and arduous gold trail they had followed so patiently.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PLACE OF MYSTERY.

Camp was made that night at the edge of the plateau, in the midst of which, "like a hump on a camel's back," as Tom put it, the mysterious "mesa" or butte that marked the site of the ancient mine was located. Before dawn the next morning, while the stars were still bright in the sky, there was a scene of activity about the halting place. Wing Lung's cooking fire blazed up bravely in the chilly air, for they had once more reached the land of sagebrush roots and desert scrub.

The notes of Nat's bugle sounded a cheery reveille, but there was no need for that signal to get the boys out of bed. They had lain awake in their blankets half the night speculating and chatting concerning what the coming day held

for them. When the red rim of the sun appeared above the eastern edge of the desert they were halfway to the lone butte, speeding recklessly over the rough ground. Full daylight found an anxious group assembled at the foot of the mesa, gazing up wonderingly at the myriads of holes that honeycombed it from the ground to its flat, table-like summit.

From a distance, compared with the long ranges all about, the lone mesa had not appeared large. Now, however, it loomed up like a mountain before them. If, as Mr. Chilvers and Dr. Duncan believed, the whole interior of that Titanic anthill was honeycombed with galleries, it might take a long time to explore it thoroughly.

Already they had surveyed the crude apparatus by means of which the miner had collected his first finds on his trip to the place with Owens, the dead prospector, whose bones lay bleaching on the desert sands. But with what lay before them

they had scant attention to waste on anything outlying the mined mesa itself.

Picks, shovels, ropes and dynamite had been brought from the auto, which, with the motor cycles and tents, formed part of the camp below. Lanterns also, of course, were an important part of their equipment. For a time, as if participating in some solemn ceremony, the party stood there gazing at the place that, up to the time Mr. Chilvers and Owens had invaded it, had not been seen by the eyes of a white man.

At last Tom's uncle broke the spell.

"We have a long day before us. Don't let's waste it."

By a common impulse they moved forward over slightly rising ground. Before them lay the mouth of the mesa, a dark opening with huge pillars of some sort of black, basaltic stone forming the door posts and keystone.

"We'll stop here and light up," said Mr. Chilvers as they paused on the threshold.

He spoke, perhaps unconsciously, in a half whisper. It did not appear strange to the boys that he should hush his voice on the outpost of an ancient civilization. In fact, they all felt strongly the mystic import of the place, the sense of glories past and gone that hung about it. But all this didn't interfere with the practical sides of their natures for more than a short time. Before long the lanterns were all lighted, and Mr. Chilvers nodded to show that he was ready. Then, with the miner's stout figure in advance, they plunged from the sunlight into a soft, dense darkness.

The lanterns shone brilliantly, illumining the walls of a wide passage with a floor that sloped gently upward. They surmised that it led to the upper levels of the mesa, but of this, of course, they could not be sure.

The walls appeared to be of a sort of sandstone and did not show, even to the boys' inexperienced eyes, the slightest trace of being of a

gold-bearing variety. Dr. Duncan shook his head as he looked about him.

"I'm afraid that the whole mesa is of this formation, Chilvers," he said, "and in that case your dream of a vast gold mine is shattered."

But Tom's uncle was not downcast.

"Wait till we see the whole of it," he said; "it will be ample time to talk then."

Presently the passage began to twist and turn in a zig-zag fashion. Plainly they were getting higher. All at once, without warning, they emerged into a large sort of cave, but whether it was of natural or artificial formation it would have been impossible to say. As they flashed their lanterns hither and thither about this great chamber they saw that in parts of it great piles of rock lay as if they had at some remote period been dumped there with definite intention.

The miner darted over to one of these and then, with a cry of triumph, held up a small chunk of rock. In the light of the lanterns, as they

crowded about, it flashed and glittered brilliantly. Through its dark body ran veins of yellow metal.

"Thread gold!" cried the miner, and the doctor immediately confirmed his analysis. "In these piles there must be $10,000 worth of it at least!"

"I have it!" cried Dr. Duncan suddenly. "This place must have been a sort of clearing house for the mine; it was to this central chamber that the ore was brought to be picked over before it was refined."

"My idea exactly, doctor," was the rejoinder; "and look yonder, if I'm not mistaken, that's a crude sort of smelting furnace."

He indicated something that looked not unlike a rude altar. But above it the roof was smoke-blackened and a hole had been pierced, if it had not already existed, leading evidently to the plateau above and forming a natural chimney. A few fragments of ore lying on this furnace, as it undoubtedly had been, and a thin trickle of gold still adhering to the stones in one part of it,

showed that the miner's guess had been a correct one.

After a time devoted to the discussion of this discovery, they noticed that leading off the central chamber were numerous doors or rude openings. They decided to investigate these, and forthwith made a disquieting discovery. Evidently the small chambers, which looked out over the desert through the holes they had noticed from below, had been used as dwelling places for the miners. Each contained a rude sort of shelf built up out of adobe which might have served either as a cooking or sleeping place, it was hard to decide which. Two of these chambers had been investigated when Tom, who had pushed into a third, gave a sharp cry. Rushing up to him, they found the boy regarding with horrified eyes a shriveled human form that lay upon the floor. Partially mummified as the body was, it was easy to see that it had been in life an unusually small Indian. A few strands of straight

black hair still hung from the withered, ape-like features. So perfectly, in fact, was the body preserved that it was almost possible to trace an expression of horror on the features, the look of one whom an unexpected death had overtaken in the midst of every-day pursuits. As if to emphasize this, there lay beside the petrified figure a stone pestle and mortar.

In several other of the small chambers, of which there were scores, they found a similar thing—the same small form, withered and dried, and yet perfectly enough preserved for the features to be almost distinct.

"It is plain enough," remarked the doctor after a time, "that some cataclysm of nature wiped out all who once worked in this mine. But what was it? What could it have been?"

No answer to the question was found that day, and it was too late to explore further by the time that the small chambers and the great cavern had been thoroughly examined. Early next day

the search went on once more. They were compelled to proceed rapidly, for without more available water they would be forced to return in time to get a fresh supply. As yet they had plenty, the tank having been replenished at Bitter Creek Springs.

The boys had felt somewhat disappointed at the results of the first day's investigation of the lone mesa. Somehow, they had expected to stumble over strata in which the yellow gold would lie like moldy cheese, waiting to be pried out. The net result of the day had been interesting, it is true, but not what they had expected. Accordingly, they were ready next day long before their elders had given the word to start out once more on the search.

Dr. Duncan was convinced by this time that the interior of the mesa was nothing more than a vast beehive in which had dwelt the miners of the past. From what they had already seen, he was inclined to think that the workers in the old

mines were but little more than slaves, if not actually in a condition of servitude. Possibly they were prisoners, taken by the tribes that controlled the mine from some less active race.

"From time to time on the Nevada desert," he said, "gold cups, spearheads and ornaments of various sorts have been found that have puzzled the most learned of antiquaries as to their source. It would not surprise me if this lone mesa is the place from which those valuable relics issued."

Between them, Mr. Chilvers and the doctor had come to the conclusion that the mines themselves lay below the mesa. It was to find the shaft or shafts that led to these lower regions that they now bent all their efforts. Before entering the place that morning the boys had been called together and informed of the conclusions that had been reached. Instructions were given to scatter throughout the place and give immediate notice of any newly discovered passage.

As before, they all made their way to the great cavern, off which the small cubicles opened, and then adopted separate routes. Ned and Tom struck off alone toward a dark corner of the place which had not yet been explored.

Ned confided to Tom, however, that the day before he had fancied for an instant, as his lantern flashed on it, that he had perceived an opening in that direction. This was enough to set Tom "on fire" at once. The two lads lost no time in striking out for the scene of Ned's discovery. Sure enough, an opening lay before them. Unlike the openings into the small chambers, whatever lay beyond it was not lighted. To enter it was to take a plunge into the unknown.

Excitement urged the two boys on. What if they had stumbled on the looked-for shaft, the passage that led to a new Golconda? The very thought was enough to set their pulses throbbing, the blood stirring in their veins.

Without hesitation they plunged into the dark-

ness that lay beyond the opening in the rocky wall. The next instant the lights that they carried vanished from view, had any one been watching in the outer chamber. But no eyes were upon them. The other treasure hunters were far too busy with their own lines of investigation to pay any attention to what Ned and Tom were doing.

It was ten minutes later that a pallid-faced, terror-stricken lad rushed from the dark entrance, his unlighted lantern swinging wildly as he ran.

It was Tom. As he gained the great cave, or chamber, he gave utterance to an alarmed shout:

"Uncle Hugh! Doctor!"

"What's the trouble?" came from the shadows on the opposite side of the vaulted place, in which the boy's voice rang hollowly.

"It's Ned! Something has happened to him! Come quick!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE DISCOVERIES.

When Ned and Tom had entered the tunnel which lay beyond the opening they had discovered, they advanced rapidly for a few score of feet. The walls glistened with quartz, which they imagined, in their ignorance of such matters, must be pure gold. Wild with excitement at the thought that they had discovered the much-sought entrance to the mines below, they hastened along.

Ned was in the lead and Tom a few paces behind. Tom stopped a few hundred feet from the surface to examine a curious quartz formation. He was still holding up his lamp to examine it when he was startled by the crash of glass in front of him and the sound of a body falling.

He turned quickly around and found that Ned

had fallen to the ground and that it was the noise of his chum's breaking lantern that had startled him.

Terribly alarmed, Tom hastened to Ned's side. The boy lay outstretched on the floor of the passage, his arms spread wide just as he had fallen. Tom tried in vain to rouse him, and it was during these efforts that he became aware that just beyond where Ned lay the passage was crossed by a fissure or crack which extended clear across the floor and up one wall. It was not more than a foot or so wide. Tom had just taken in these details when he became aware that from this crack a sort of bluish haze was rising. At the same instant he likewise discovered that his head felt curiously dizzy, and an oppression seemed to weigh down his limbs.

He leaned down and tried to drag Ned toward the mouth of the tunnel, but after hauling him a few feet he was compelled to relinquish his task. If he had remained in the place much

longer, Tom felt that he, too, would succumb. Accordingly, summoning every ounce of strength he could muster, he fled reelingly toward the entrance of the tunnel to summon aid.

At his cry, the doctor and Mr. Chilvers came running across the floor of the cavern. The others followed them, Wing Lung gesticulating excitedly. The faithful Chinee was always deeply moved by anything that affected Massel Ned. But none was allowed to enter the tunnel but the lad's two elders. The rest waited outside in suspense as the two men vanished, carrying their lanterns. Before very long they emerged, panting heavily and half-dragging, half-carrying Ned.

The doctor had prudently brought along his medicine case, and Wing was dispatched to where it lay with the other supplies on the opposite side of the big cave. Bending over Ned, the doctor applied restoratives, and before long

the boy's blue lips and pallid face began to resume their natural tint.

The doctor breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

"That was a narrow escape!" he exclaimed, as Ned opened his eyes. "That tunnel was full of a deadly gas. I am unable to classify it, but in my opinion carbon monoxide was certainly one of its ingredients. It issued from that crack in the floor of the passage."

"Doesn't that suggest something to you, doctor?" asked Mr. Chilvers interestedly as Ned sat up and gulped once or twice.

"In what way, Chilvers?"

"Why, that at some remote time this whole chamber may have become suddenly filled by that gas and thus suffocated those mummified figures we saw in the cells."

"By Jove, Chilvers, that is a very probable theory. At that remote period, when the interior fires of the earth were still active, there is no doubt but that the gases issuing from that crack

must have been far more deadly in quality and greater in body. The mere fact that that crack exists shows that some convulsion of nature, an earthquake or the subsidence of a 'fault,' must have caused it. The immediate result would be a rush of gases from the fissure, probably in sufficient volume to overwhelm all within reach of their poisonous breath. The sudden disaster probably terrorized the superstitious aborigines who worked these mines, and they fled before what they may have deemed the wrath of their gods."

Ned's return to his senses prevented the doctor from elaborating his theory further at the time; but he subsequently published a brochure on the subject, which may be obtained at any of our large libraries. In his theory, however, he agrees with Professor Jepson, "On the Lost Races of North America," and Dr. Emil Von Brunt, the German authority on the same subject. Both these authors agree that some con-

vulsion of nature, acting on the superstitious terrors of the ancient races, may have caused whole districts to be depopulated in the ancient days of the continent.

The recovery of Ned from his stupor was rapid and, although he felt slight nausea for some time, he experienced no other ill effects.

As soon as he felt stronger it was decided to resume without delay the search for the shaft that the doctor now felt certain existed. He was compelled to own that it might, as a matter of fact, lie down the passage of the poisoned air; but, of course, search for it in that deadly place would be entirely out of the question. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to prosecute the search in other directions.

Tom it was who suggested a course that ultimately had important results.

"Why not search for some route to the plateau at the top of the mesa?" he suggested, when

about every nook and cranny of the great cavern had been explored without result.

"There's no reason against it," declared Mr. Chilvers dryly, "except the excellent one that there is no way of getting up there."

Tom pointed to the chimney-like opening above the ancient smelting furnace.

"I think I could worm my way up that if you'd let me," he said. "I could carry a rope with me and afterward, if I got to the top, haul up the rope ladder after me."

The rope ladder mentioned was a bit of apparatus which Mr. Chilvers had, with great fore sight, insisted on having included in the equipment. How useful it was to prove will shortly be seen.

Tom's elders were rather dubious about allowing him to try the climb. True, the chimney was full of projections and outcropping bits of rock, and to an active lad like Tom presented no great difficulties. Still, there was unquestionably

THE FIRST THING THAT MET HIS GAZE ALMOST CAUSED HIM TO LOSE HIS GRIP ON THE EDGE OF THE HOLE.

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a risk attached to such an attempt. But at length Tom prevailed. Stripping off his coat he prepared to ascend the narrow funnel. His first step was to climb up on the long extinct furnace and fasten round his waist one end of a coil of light rope.

Then he was boosted into the chimney on the shoulders of his uncle. Wedging his body across, he began his risky ascent. It was not as easy by any means as it had looked from below, but Tom was a dogged boy, with muscles of steel and a heart of oak. Difficulties were to him things made to be overcome. With stubborn persistence he wormed his way up, taking advantage of a good hand or foothold to rest every now and then.

At last, like a Steeple Jack emerging from a chimney, his head projected from the top and he looked about him. The first thing that met his gaze almost caused him to lose his grip on

the edge of the hole and go toppling down to the hard stones of the furnace below him.

Facing him was the figure of a man with one arm outstretched menacingly, as if warning invaders from the summit. It was not till Tom had experienced an unpleasant shock that he realized that the figure was carved out of stone; but so naturally was it executed that, coming on it suddenly, any one would have taken it for a living and threatening form.

"What's up, Tom?" came a cry from below at this instant.

The watchers, who had anxiously followed his progress up the rocky shaft, had noticed him halt at the summit.

"Nothing," hailed back Tom; "but I just met a gentleman."

"What's that?" came an astonished shout.

"Can't tell you now. See you later," said Tom as, chuckling at his joke, he clambered out upon the broad flat plateau which was the summit of

the mesa. Around his waist the rope was still attached. Using the stone man, which had apparently once been some sort of idol, as a hitching post, the disrespectful Tom unfastened the rope from himself and made it fast to the outstretched arm.

"You're a lot more use that way than you are scaring the life out of folks," he remarked as he set off on a tour of inspection.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHILVERS TAKES HIS LIFE IN HIS HANDS.

The top of the mesa—or possibly, to speak more correctly, one should call it a butte—was about five acres in extent. It was as flat as a board, and Tom, as he stood perched high above the surrounding desert and the distant arid ranges, felt like a sort of aerial Robinson Crusoe. At least, if he had been a poetical youth, he might have thus compared himself.

Being a real boy, however, he was reminded of a visit he had once made to the roof of a sky-scraper in San Francisco. He advanced to the edge and peered over. The sight made him fairly dizzy. Far below him lay the dreary, waterless plain. Upon it, dwarfed to mere toys, were the motor cycles, the auto and the tents.

The tents, from that height, looked like those that come with sets of toy soldiers.

"I guess from below I'd look about as big as a pint of peanuts," grinned Tom to himself as he took in the spectacle.

All this time he had completely forgotten about the impatient party below. In fact, Tom, now that he had gained the summit, felt inclined to conduct a personal tour of investigation. Accordingly, he set off to take a walk around the top of the butte.

As has been said, the place was as flat as a table top, and the figure of the stone idol, which had the body of a man but a distorted head like an old gargoyle, was the most prominent feature of it. As Tom approached the other end of the place, however, he saw that, not far from the edge, two huge, upright stones had been set on end with a third placed across them.

"Now, what under the sun is that?" thought the boy. "Gracious, it looks like a gallows!" he

gasped the next minute. "I hope I'm not in for any more ghastly discoveries. The sight of those bodies in the cells will do me for quite a while."

He approached the queer-looking apparatus and found that, fixed between the two upright stones, was a sort of drum of moldering wood with the remnants of a chain still hanging to it and clanking dismally in the desert wind. Under this chain was a dark hole. With a shout of exultation Tom realized instantly what it was that he had found—the shaft!

But this was not to be the end of his discoveries. He came upon another opening in the floor of the plateau, down which a flight of steps led. But he decided not to explore this till the others arrived.

"I guess I've got enough to astonish them with now," he said to himself as he hastened back toward the mouth of the rocky chimney by which he had ascended.

Kneeling down, Tom gave a long cry.

"Hull-o-o-o-o-o!"

"Hullo-o-o-o-o!" came reverberating back to him up the chimney.

"Hook on your rope ladder as soon as you like," he cried cheerfully.

"Why, have you found something?" came Mr. Chilvers' eager voice, booming up through the natural speaking tube.

"I've found the shaft!"

"What?"

Even up there Tom could hear a buzz of amazement among those below.

"Say that again," demanded Dr. Duncan.

"I've found the shaft!" yelled Tom, determined that there should be no doubt as to just what he was announcing.

"And that isn't all," he went on, unwilling to relinquish the pleasant feeling of causing a big sensation.

"What else, for goodness sake?" cried Dr. Duncan, half laughing, as he gazed up at Tom's

red, excited face framed in the rocky mouth of the chimney.

"Another hole in the ground, or in the air, whichever you've a mind to call it," declared Tom; "but hitch on the rope ladder and come up and see for yourselves."

You may be sure that no time was lost in doing this. As soon as Tom could make fast the end of the rope ladder to the much-abused idol they came up one at a time, Dr. Duncan and Mr. Chilvers being the first. With an ill-concealed air of triumph, Tom led the way to the shaft after the idol had been examined.

"There, what do you think of that, Uncle Hugh?" he asked, waving his hand toward the upright stones and the rough windlass.

Mr. Chilvers clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Tom, I guess you've found it," he exclaimed. "One way or another you boys are always to the fore. What do you think of it, doctor?"

"It is the shaft, unquestionably. But the question arises, how are we to get down it?"

"Well, we won't cross our bridges till we get to them. In the meantime, let's examine this other 'hole,' as Tom calls it."

This was the opening in the plateau down which led the steps that Tom had stumbled on just after his discovery of the shaft. The two men regarded it in silence for a minute or two, then Dr. Duncan spoke:

"It wouldn't surprise me if this stairway leads to the lower chamber," he said.

"But we saw no opening below," objected Mr. Chilvers.

"Possibly it's blocked up from that side. At any rate, this staircase is worth investigating."

The others had arrived on the summit by this time, and Dr. Duncan borrowed a lantern from Al Anderson, who still carried his light. Followed by the boys, the geologist dived into the darkness, the light shining like a glow-worm as

he cautiously descended the steep stairway. After Ned's experience, none of the party, the leaders least of all, was inclined to take chances.

The stairway led down steeply for some ten or twelve feet. Then it became an inclined way on which they slipped and stumbled. At last their progress was halted by a door. But it was unlike any ordinary portal. In fact, had it not been for a great bolt which closed it, it is doubtful if they would have been able to differentiate it from the wall, so perfectly was it fitted.

Dr. Duncan drew the bolt back, and, although centuries must have elapsed since it was touched, the bar of metal moved easily, and when they pushed it, the door swung outward on its hinges without a sound. As Dr. Duncan had half expected, they found themselves once more in the great chamber from which Tom had climbed by the difficult "chimney route."

Retracing their steps, they once more emerged upon the "roof," as it may be called, of the

strange formation, planted by itself in the midst of the barren lands.

Before they had reascended the stairway, Dr. Duncan and Mr. Chilvers had sent Wing to the pile of supplies to get a spare lantern and all the rope. Regaining the roof, the party made for the two upright stones that marked the mouth of what they were now certain was the shaft.

The rope was rapidly put in shape for reeving out, and then one end of it was passed over the windlass, which had a core of metal and which tests proved to be sound and strong. This done, Mr. Chilvers, as if by previous arrangement with Dr. Duncan, divested himself of his coat and adjusted the rope into a sort of bos'un's chair in which he seated himself. To the boys his purpose was at once apparent.

He meant to descend the shaft alone at the end of that all too slender looking rope. At the last moment even Dr. Duncan tried to dissuade

him, but the plucky miner would not hear of giving up his project.

"Lay hold of the rope," he ordered, "and when I give the word—lower away!"

It looked terribly risky, this drop into the unknown, but they had no choice but to lay hold of the rope and await the word. First affixing a lighted lantern to his belt, Mr. Chilvers gave a final inspection to the windlass, upon the strength of which his life depended. This accomplished to his satisfaction, he swung himself over the yawning mouth of the shaft.

"Lower away!" came the word.

"Easy now!" as in their agitation they let him down rather faster than was comfortable.

The party manning the rope belayed it more slowly.

"So long!" came up a cry from the black mouth as it swallowed the intrepid miner.

"Good luck!" burst spontaneously from the lips of those left above as they cautiously paid out the rope, taking care not to let it down too fast.

CHPTER XXVIII.

ALADDIN'S CAVE.

At last, after almost three hundred feet of rope had been paid out, and the line was coming to an end, it grew slack.

"He's landed somewhere," was the cry.

For half an hour or more they waited and then came two sharp, quick tugs on the rope. According to the prearranged code, the doctor interpreted this as having two meanings.

"Everything is all right," and "Haul me up quickly."

In the hauling up process a different plan was adopted. Two turns of the rope were taken around the windlass, which was then turned by Al and Wing Lung, while the others hauled in the slack. When Wing and Al grew tired, two of the others took a spell, and in this way it

was not long before, to their great relief, the head and shoulders of Mr. Chilvers appeared above the opening of the shaft.

As soon as he had brushed some of the dust out of his face and hair, he told them his story. The shaft was sunk straight down for a distance of three hundred feet. How the ancient tribes had ever accomplished such a feat he could not imagine, but so it was. At frequent intervals his lamp had shown him galleries branching off from the main shaft, but guessing that these were worked out he had kept on going.

At last his feet struck the bottom of the shaft and he got out of his not over comfortable seat. Before him stretched a tunnel which, seemingly, had been driven for quite a distance into the earth. He followed it up for several yards and at last came to a place where there had apparently been a landslide. At any rate, a great mass of boulders and débris blocked further

progress. There were plenty of signs of gold, he said, but, and here came the disappointing part, he had encountered no abnormal quantities of it.

His listeners began to look grave. What if they had come all that way and endured so many hardships only to find a mine which had been worked out—drained dry of its precious yield?

Mr. Chilvers saw the looks and hastened on.

"Mark you," he said, "I don't for a minute think, as it is easy to see that you do, that the mine will prove nothing but a fizzle. From what I have seen, I believe that beyond that heap of rubble and rock the vein continues. It was there that they were working when the same earthquake that caused the outflow of poisonous gas shook down that rock blocking the passage. Remove that, and I am certain that we shall find our way to a new Eldorado."

"But it would take weeks to get it away," objected Dr. Duncan, "and more labor than we

could muster. Besides, work down there would be far too arduous for any but trained miners."

"We don't need trained miners."

"Why not, pray?"

"For the reason that we have a servant who will move it swiftly and expeditiously."

"Wha fo'? Me movee lockee?" cried Wing Lung, thinking that he was the servant named.

"I mean dynamite. We will blast our way through that tumbledown mass of rock and satisfy ourselves whether or not the lead runs on."

"When do you mean to do this?"

"Now!" The miner's lips compressed in a firm line.

"Chilvers, to set off a blast down there will be dangerous in the extreme. The man who does it takes his life in his hands."

"I cannot help it. I must know before night if we have followed fool's gold or if we are on the verge of a new Ophir."

From a quiet, undemonstrative man, Tom's

uncle was transformed into an excited miner on the verge of either a vast fortune or ruin. He would not listen to Dr. Duncan's efforts to dissuade him, but dispatched Wing Lung for four sticks of giant powder at once. He also told the Chinaman to bring several yards of slow fuse and some caps. All these things had formed part of the supplies carried into the cave below, and it did not take Wing Lung, assisted by the boys, long to get them and bring them to the summit of the mesa.

Mr. Chilvers placed them carefully in a bag with a lot of excelsior to prevent them bumping against each other or the walls of the shaft, while he was being lowered. This done, he cautioned them to let him down as slowly as possible.

"But when I give the rope two jerks, haul me up as fast as your strength will let you," he ordered. "I'm going to set a slow fuse and I guess the spark won't reach the detonators till

I reach the top of the shaft, but don't take chances. Haul me up as fast as you can."

You may be sure they all resolved to do this, and with a parting word Mr. Chilvers was once more lowered into the shaft. I leave you to imagine with what breathless and tense excitement and anxiety they waited for the two tugs at the rope which would tell them that the fuse had been lighted. When the signal came, they realized that it depended on their efforts solely to pull Mr. Chilvers out of danger before the shattering explosion occurred.

Frantically they hauled till the rope smoked on the windlass. It seemed an age before the miner appeared once more. Every second Ned and his chums had been listening with dread for the sound of the fatal explosion, but it seemed that they had beaten it.

Eagerly they dragged the miner out of the loop in the rope, and he motioned them all back from the mouth of the shaft with outstretched

hands. They all heeded the warning with alacrity.

"It will go off any minute now," he said, breathing hard, "and the mouth of that shaft is a good place to stay away from."

"Suppose it had gone off before you reached the top?" Ned could not help saying.

"In that case—but we won't talk of that. I——"

Bo-oo-oo-m!

A reverberation that shook the mesa followed the hollow roar that proceeded from the mouth of the shaft. The blast had been "shot," as they say in mining phrase. Before long, from the shaft clouds of thick, yellow smoke began to pour. Mr. Chilvers warned the boys back.

"That smoke is poison," he said; "it is charged with deadly gases from the dynamite. Keep away from it."

It was two hours before the miner announced that he was going down the shaft.

"It may not be safe yet, but I'll risk it," he said. "If I give a shout, haul me up again."

But they felt the rope slacken in due time and knew that he had reached the bottom of the shaft in safety. Three tugs at the rope assured them of this. Then succeeded a long interval. No signs came from below. They began to be the prey of all sorts of fears. Had their friend been overcome by the fumes below? Was he lying insensible in the bowels of the earth with none to aid him?

"I can't stand this suspense much longer!" exclaimed Dr. Duncan at length. "If we don't hear something in five minutes, I'll go down myself."

The five minutes had almost passed when there came two strong, self-confident tugs on the rope. Somehow Ned, who was holding the rope and waiting a signal from below, sensed in the very energy with which they were given that they betokened good news. They laid hold of

the rope once more, and when the miner reappeared from below, they saw by his face that he had wonderful news.

"Well?" demanded Dr. Duncan.

"Aladdin's palace!" gasped the almost exhausted miner. "That blast uncovered the entrance to one of the most wonderful sights of the new world! It is a chamber that simply sparkles with gold, and that, moreover, contains something that was almost as good to me when I reached it—a spring of clear, cool water."

* * * * * * *

It was the next day that the four boys, who had been lowered in turn by their friends above, stood at the end of the passage and began clambering over the vast mass of loose rock and shale left by the momentous blast. The effect of the explosion had been terrific. Rock, broken and splintered, lay in all directions. But with the knowledge of what lay beyond, the boys

speedily scrambled over this, taking no account of bruised knees or cut fingers.

As their lanterns flashed into the darkness beyond and illuminated it, the boys gave a simultaneous gasp. It was the only mode of expression left to them just then.

The enchanted palace of the genii of the Arabian Nights could have formed no more wonderful picture. They gazed into an enormous circular cavern, fully fifty feet in height, and apparently more than twice that in diameter.

In the glare of the lamps its vaulted roof shone and flashed with many-faced deposits of quartz and mica. While this was beautiful, and rivaled in color a jeweled palace of the enchanted east, the boys had eyes only for something else.

The dark greenish rocks that formed the sides of the place were literally honeycombed with a metal that gleamed dully in the glare of their lanterns.

"Gold!" shouted Tom, pointing.

"Gold!—Gold!—Gold!" the echoes went shouting and ringing off into the depths of the cavern.

The end of the gold trail had been reached at last, and treasure inexhaustible lay before them.

* * * * * * *

The time is six months later. Where once there lay the brooding silence of the desert, there is now the busy hum of machinery and men. All about the lone mesa, as if by magic, there have sprung up mining properties and claims, all of which are being worked to the limit.

Such is the call of gold, the magic lure that it holds out to men. It can bring them across burning deserts, guide them over trackless snows and cruel mountain peaks. Within a week after the claim to the Chilvers Mine had been recorded, there began a rush to the new gold fields that was unprecedented. As if by magic, stumping mills, smelting furnaces and rough shanties

sprang up. A hotel was erected, and before long a small, noisy town lay at the foot of the long deserted mesa of the desert.

But of all the properties, the Chilvers is, of course, the most productive. In fact, experts who have examined it say that the supply of gold in the leads opening from that ancient cavern are almost inexhaustible. But of course the discovered leads cannot be worked outside the Chilvers' claims, so that its generous owners hope that there will be a good share for all the argonauts.

Mesaville, as the place is called, owes no small part of its prosperity to the fact that pure water is plentiful. All that is necessary is to tap the vein from which flowed the spring that Hugh Chilvers found that eventful day that he set off the big blast on the lowest level of the ancient mine.

As for the boys, each possesses a generous amount of shares in the mine, and Wing Lung,

too, is quite by way of being a capitalist. The party of Chinese that so harassed Mr. Chilvers before his prosperous days dropped out of sight; but the following paragraphs from a San Francisco paper of recent date shed some light on their ultimate fate.

"An odd scene occurred in the well-known banking house of Henderson & Co. yesterday. A Chinese of unusual stature, who afterward said that his name was Sing Lee, was arrested on complaint of Mr. Robert Henderson, the head of the firm. Mr. Henderson said that Sing Lee had threatened to kill him.

"The Chinaman, after his arrest, told a rambling story of having been engaged by Mr. Henderson to obtain a map of a mythical gold mine somewhere on the Nevada desert. According to his story, Mr. Henderson agreed to pay him a large sum for producing the map, which, it appeared, was in the possession of a roving miner. The Chinaman claims that he tried to

carry out his part of the contract, but that when he informed Mr. Henderson he had failed in his mission the latter ordered him from his office. Sing Lee then tried, he says, to make the banker pay him something for his efforts to obtain the map.

"In court to-day Mr. Henderson, who is well known in the mining world, declared that he had never seen the Chinaman before. It being found that the Mongolian had no papers, he was ordered deported. Two of his friends who tried to make a demonstration in the court room were promptly arrested, and, as they also were minus their papers, they were sent out of the country."

* * * * * * *

And now it is necessary to leave our young friends for a time. Their work and their play in the gold fields which they had helped to discover under such strenuous circumstances had brought them into contact with the unique people and conditions of a mining town. They felt

that these experiences were not the least interesting of the eventful trip, and they often recalled and recounted them after their return to the old home and the new college life.

They were ready, however, ere long, for fresh adventures, and the door of opportunity soon opened. Of course Wing Lung shared the new experiences as he had the old, and those who care to learn how he and our Motor Cycle Chums conducted themselves in the dangers, difficulties and humorous incidents of further travel may renew their acquaintance with them and their friends in the next volume of this series.

THE END.

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What is more delightful than a re-union of college girls after the summer vacation? Certainly nothing that precedes it in their experience—at least, if all class-mates are as happy together as the Wellington girls of this story. Among Molly's interesting friends of the second year is a young Japanese girl, who ingratiates her "humbly" self into everybody's affections speedily and permanently.

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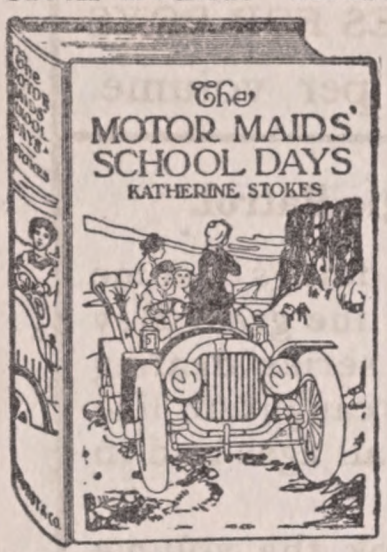

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Through the fascinating pages of the narrative also stalks, like a grim figure of impending tragedy, the shaggy form of Silver Tip, the giant grizzly. In modern juvenile writing, there is little to be found as gripping as the scene in which Rob and Silver Tip meet face to face. The boy is weaponless and,—but it would not be fair to divulge the termination of the battle. A book which all Boy Scouts should secure and place upon their shelves to be read and re-read.

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